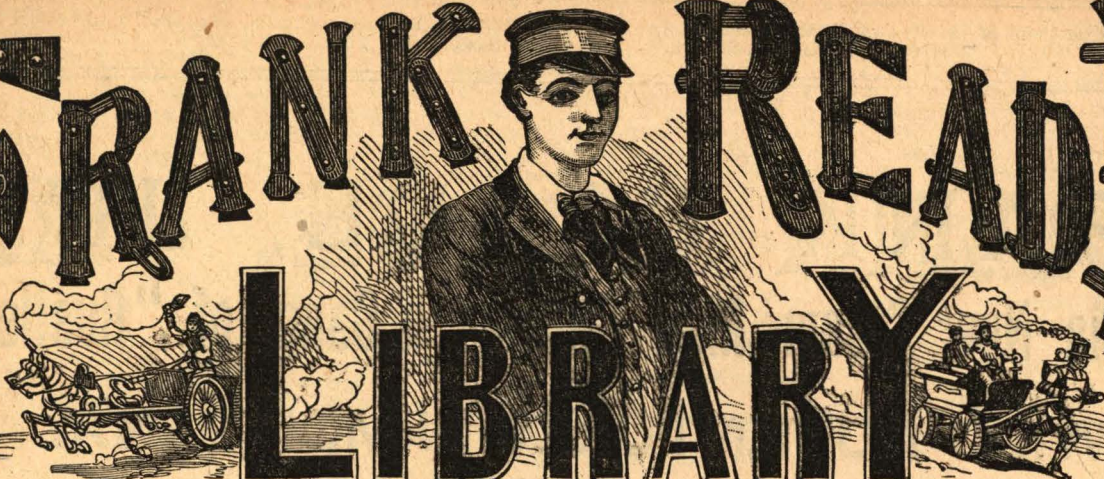


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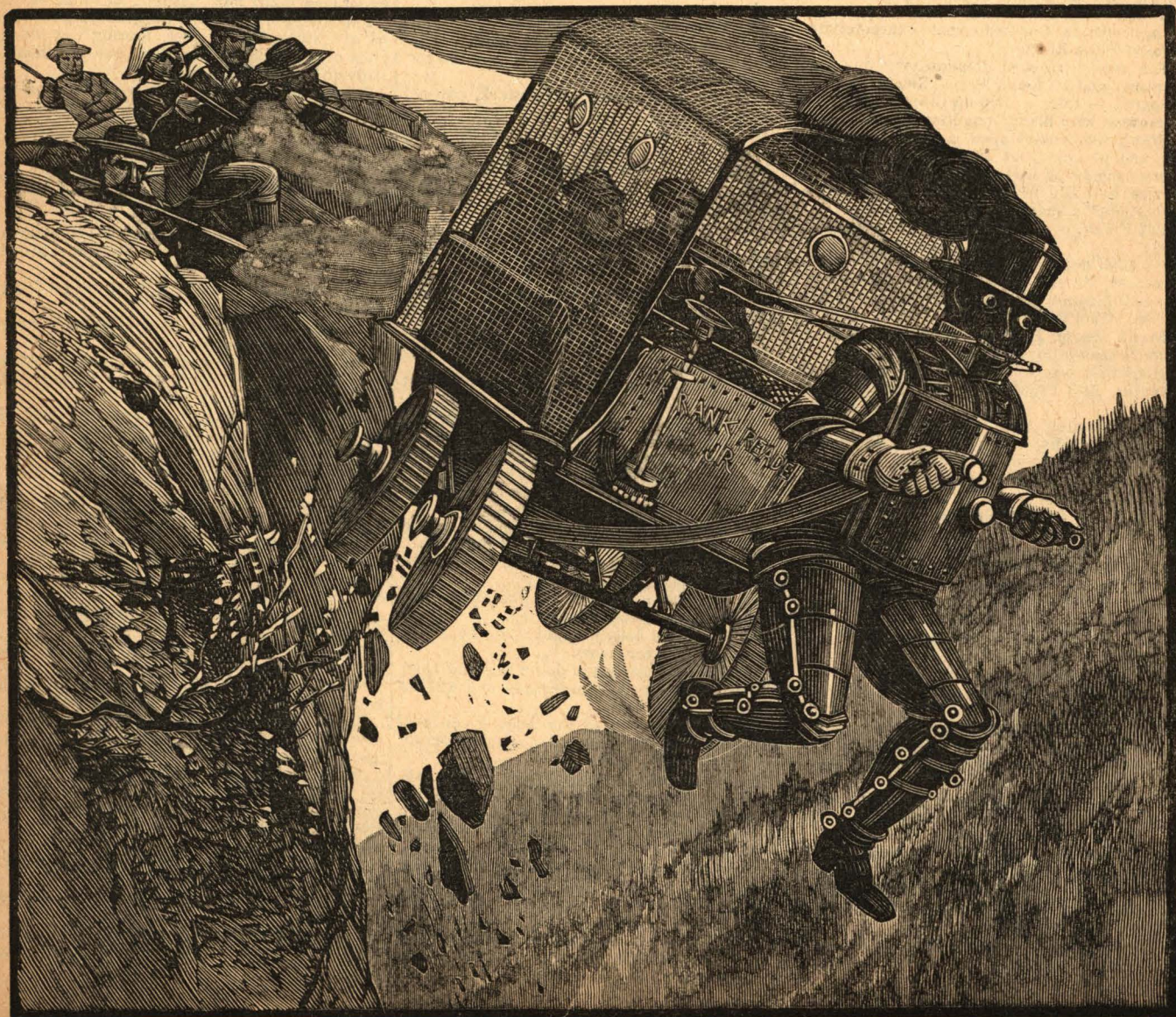
Vol. I

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Frank Reade, Jr.,

With His New Steam Man Chasing a Gang of "Rustlers," or,
WILD ADVENTURES IN MONTANA.

By "NONAME."



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FRANK READE, JR.,

With His New Steam Man Chasing a Gang of "Rustlers;"

OR,

WILD ADVENTURES IN MONTANA.

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Frank Reade, Jr., With His New Steam Man in Mexico; or, Hot Work Among the Greasers," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

EN ROUTE TO MONTANA.

THRILLING reports had reached the borders of civilization, and, indeed, all its centers, of certain wild and lawless deeds by a gang of desperadoes in Montana, near the Wyoming line and the North Powder river.

It was said that these desperadoes had banded together as a class of robbers, cut-throats and highwaymen, and had assumed the right to appropriate the somewhat characteristic title of "the Rustlers."

The report reached Readestown, one fine morning, and it found Frank Reade, Jr., all prepared to take a trip up through the wild Northwest with his famous New Steam Man.

Frank was bound upon a trip of exploration and pleasure, but some of the inventor's friends suggested that he might do humanity a service and add to his laurels by giving the "Rustlers" a sharp chase.

But Frank, ever anxious to avoid notoriety, said:

"I shall not bother them if they do not me. Of course, if I saw them committing some lawless act I would promptly interfere, if in my power. That is all."

Frank Reade, Jr., was a young man, scarcely more than a boy in years.

His father before him had been a renowned inventor, and Frank had followed the same line.

The charming little town of Readestown was founded by Reade, Sr., and there the shops of the inventor were located.

Here he built all his famous inventions, and really claimed his home.

Frank was fortunately blessed with plenty of money.

Yet if he had been poor, it would have been for but a short time, as he had a natural faculty for acquiring wealth.

Of course this was a powerful lever in all his enterprises.

His latest invention was the New Steam Man.

This was a most wonderful machine, of which we will endeavor to give a brief and imperfect account.

Imagine a tall, powerful man of giant height, made of plates of iron with hinges for joints, and driving rods down the legs like a steam locomotive.

In the body of the Man was the furnace and boiler of the engine. The tall hat worn by the Man formed the smokestack.

Upon the Man's back was the steam chest, indicator and gauge.

The throttle valve and whistle were controlled and operated by means of reins. In the Man's mouth was the whistle.

It did not seem credible that such a piece of mechanism could be constructed and made to work, but such seemed a fact.

The stride of the Man was controlled by the driving rods operated by the force of steam.

In the Man's feet were long iron spikes to give him foothold.

So much for the Man. Now let us look at the wagon, the shafts of which were held at his hips by the Man.

It was also made of thin plates of iron, with four wheels, which had grooved tires.

The wagon was arranged with quite spacious bunkers for coal.

Also there were compartments for the storage of ammunition, supplies, weapons and all the articles necessary for a trip into a dangerous country.

Over the wagon was a framework, covered with a netting of hardened steel.

The meshes were very fine, yet perfectly impervious to a rifle bullet.

In the netting were loopholes through which to fire. In front, at the dasher, was an opening, through which came the reins, and also there was located a brake.

This is a description of the invention famed the world over as one of Frank Reade, Jr.'s best.

However this may be, the famous inventor, accompanied by two faithful servitors, an Irishman and a negro, named Barney and Pomp, had taken a number of thrilling trips through the wild West.

The Steam Man had been carefully fitted out for this last trip to the Northwest.

So it happened that one day the Man was shipped in sections aboard a special train to Cheyenne, Wyoming, as the nearest railway station to the region intended to be explored.

Frank Reade, Jr., with his two men, Barney and Pomp, traveled on the same train.

When Cheyenne was reached the Steam Man was disembarked and carefully put together.

Of course the news of the Steam Man's coming had reached Cheyenne.

Consequently a large crowd was out to take a look at the wonderful invention.

Workmen had been brought along by Frank to put the Man together.

They soon succeeded in doing this and then Barney built a fire in the furnace and got up steam.

Quite a delegation of the leading citizens waited upon Frank and extended their compliments and good wishes.

The young inventor shook hands with all, thanked them and then springing into the wagon cage with Barney and Pomp he waved his hand in adieu and picking up the reins opened the Steam Man's throttle.

At once the Man began to move away with long, rapid strides.

The people cheered and Frank pulled the whistle valve in reply.

Then the Steam Man left the little Western city far behind and was soon speeding across the country to the northward.

Cheyenne was in the extreme southern part of Wyoming.

Frank's objective point was the Big Horn and Powder River Mountains.

From there he intended to strike the Yellowstone and push on up through the Crow Indian country into British Columbia.

He had started out upon the trip wholly for diversion and exploration.

But before it should end he was destined to experience many most thrilling adventures.

Reaching Fort Laramie, the Steam Man crossed the North Platte river, leaving the Black Hills of Wyoming on the west and the Black Hills of Dakota to the east.

Frank sought the level prairies extending to the Powder River and the Big Horn Mountains.

And he now entered a country wild and infested with many perils.

Ensnconed in the steel cage which covered the wagon it would have seemed as if the party had little to fear.

The Steam Man was capable of attaining a terrific rate of speed equaled by few railroad trains.

He could easily outstrip any horse on level ground.

At night camp was generally made near some stream or body of water.

Altogether it was a most delightful way of traveling and keenly enjoyed by Barney and Pomp as well as Frank himself.

Barney and Pomp were ever the best of friends, yet given to skylarking and the playing of practical jokes upon each other.

Thus far the journey had been devoid of incident of thrilling sort.

But startling experiences were in store, and also near at hand.

One morning the Steam Man was leisurely jogging along across a stretch of wild prairie, when Pomp, who was at the dasher, suddenly cried, in a startled manner:

"Golly sakes, Marse Frank, jes' yo' cum here right off."

"What is the matter, Pomp?" asked Frank, not without some concern.

"Glory fo' goodness, does yo' see dat black line ober yender? I jes' finks it am Injuns."

Frank picked up a glass to scan the distant black line, but Barney, who was full of mischief, exclaimed:

"Begorra, Misther Frank, yez wud be foolish to take any stock phwativer in that naggur's eyesight. Shure, he couldn't tell a wild steer from a hoss at one hundred yards."

Pomp turned with blazing eyes.

"Wha' dat yo' say, I'ish?" he cried, hotly.

"Don' yo' insult dis chile."

"Bejabbers, I'm thinkin' that wud be a hard thing to do."

"Golly! if yo' says any mo' ob dat sort ob stuff to me, I jes' gibs yo' a piece of mah mind."

"Yez 'aven't any to give."
 "I jes' fix yo' fo' dat, I'ish."
 And with this Pomp picked up a jug of water and hurled its contents at Barney.

The Celt got the dose full in the mouth, and for a moment he was nearly strangled.

When he recovered, he was the maddest Irishman in that vicinity.

"Bejabers, I'll have the loife av yez for that, naygur!" he roared, rushing upon Pomp.

But the darky lowered his head quick as a flash.

Barney got it full in the stomach and sat down very hard in the bottom of the wagon.

"Huh! I fink you'se no 'count, I'ish," chafed Pomp as he cut a pigeon-wing. "Yo' ain't in de race at all wif dis chile."

Barney was furious, and was bound to get square with the darky, but Frank now interfered.

"No more fooling now," he said, sternly; "there's lively work before us if I'm not much mistaken."

This had the effect of cooling down the two belligerents.

But Barney had it in for Pomp, and was sure to get square with him.

Meanwhile, the black line upon the prairie had resolved itself into distinguishable objects.

A large party of horsemen were galloping across the plain and bearing directly down upon the Steam Man.

Frank kept the Man along at a moderate gait and watched them closely.

As they drew nearer he soon saw that they were not Indians but evidently a band of cowboys.

They rode with the freedom and recklessness of their kind, and came sweeping down like an avalanche.

When a hundred yards distant they came to a halt.

Then they surrounded the Man.

Frank brought the Steam Man to a halt and waited developments.

The cowboys seemed excited and somewhat surprised at the appearance upon the plains of such a strange machine.

Finally one of them shouted:

"I say, stranger, what do ye call that high-falutin' cart of yers, anyway?"

Frank raised his voice and replied:

"Can't you see? It is a Steam Man."

"Does it go by steam?"

"Yes."

"Like an engine, eh, only not on rails?"

"Exactly."

"Wall, I'll be blowed! That beats anything I ever see before. I say, start her up an' let's see her go."

Frank let the Steam Man trot around in a circle. The cowboys greeted the exhibition with cheers. It was to them a thing most marvelous.

CHAPTER II.

BATTLE WITH COWBOYS.

But though the cowboys seemed at the moment all pleasant enough, Frank was not prepared to trust them far.

He knew that they were reckless and unprincipled fellows.

He was also aware that they might take it into their heads at any moment to perpetrate some bit of deviltry.

Therefore it was safest and best to keep on guard.

"Well, gentlemen," said Frank, after he had complied with their request and showed the working of the Man, "I will ask you to break away and allow me to pass!"

"Hold on a bit," cried the leader of the gang.

"I haven't any time to waste further."

"Oh, ye ain't, eh?"

"I said so."

"In a great hurry, eh?"

"I am—yes!"

The cowboy leaders seemed to hold a brief consultation.

Frank started the Man along, but now one of them put up his hand and shouted:

"Hold on, cap'en. Don't be in a hurry."

"What do you want?" asked Frank, sharply.

"We want to axe a favor."

"What is it?"

"We're bound to admit that ye've got quite a wonderful machine there, but we'd like to try a bit of a ride in it ourselves. So if ye'll step down an' out we'll take a little turn in it an' return it to you when we get through, all safe."

This audacious proposal angered Frank beyond measure.

"You impudent rascals!" he cried, angrily.

"I will do nothing of the kind."

"Ye won't, eh?"

"No."

"Then we'll be obliged to take the machine away from ye, an' if we have to do that mebber ye won't yet it back."

Frank was almost speechless with wrath at these insulting terms.

"Barney and Pomp," he said, tersely, "be ready for a fight."

Then turning to the cowboy leader, he replied:

"I give you fair warning not to meddle with me or seek to bar my progress. Get out of my way."

Frank opened the throttle of the Steam Man and started ahead.

In an instant a yell went up from the cowboys.

Up into the air shot a cloud of lassoes.

A number of them settled down upon the Steam Man's shoulders.

Half a dozen of the lassoes would not have possessed sufficient resistance to stop the Man.

But there was fully two dozen of the rawhides about the Man's body.

This was more weight than he could drag, and he was brought to a short stop.

Frank at once picked up his rifle.

Bullets had already began to rain against the steel netting.

The famous inventor was ever averse to taking human life. But in this case it was a question of self-preservation.

He believed the cowboys to be a part of the gang of "Rustlers" whose depredations in that region were of terrible sort.

"Give it to them, Barney and Pomp," he cried. "Don't spare a single man of them."

The two servitors needed no urging.

They were working their repeaters with deadly effect.

The cowboys were dropping rapidly from their saddles.

The storm of battle surged about the Steam Man in a vortex. In vain the cowboys tried to close in upon the wagon and break through the cage.

It was equivalent to suicide to approach those deadly repeaters. Men fell rapidly, and the voyagers seemed certainly to have the best of it.

It was a thrilling situation indeed. What the cowboys hoped to do they were baffled in.

Frank moved the Steam Man forward at every available point and as the lassoes were loosed.

Steadily the cowboys were driven back. Then Pomp executed a daring move.

In the excitement of the fight the cowboys massed themselves all upon one side of the machine.

Those who had lariats about the Man were braced on their horses to hold him firmly, and they did not take an active part in the fray.

Pomp watched his opportunity closely and slipped out of the cage.

He made a dash for the Man's shoulder under the cover of hissing steam.

With a keen knife, he instantly severed the taut lassoes. It was done in the twinkling of an eye and back into the cage he sprang.

A bullet tore its way through his cap but did him no injury.

The Steam Man thus released sprang forward instantly.

A wild yell went up from the cowboys. There was a fresh fusillade, and lassoes began to fly again.

Several settled about the Steam Man's neck, but they were instantly snapped.

Down through the gang of Rustlers went the Steam Man.

Horses and men were knocked over, and the ponderous feet of the Man crushed the luckless man who chanced to get beneath them.

In a very few moments the Man had swept through the line, and was leaving the gang behind.

They came on in hot pursuit, but the Steam Man could easily outrun the ponies ridden by the Rustlers.

Very soon they were distanced, and the pursuit was given over.

When the cowboy gang had faded from sight below the horizon line Frank held the Man up for examination as to injury done.

He discovered much to his joy that no harm whatever had befallen him.

About the Man's neck was found full a score of lasso loops. These were cut away, and Frank returned to the cage.

The Steam Man went on his way as unconcerned as if the fracas had never occurred.

"Golly sakes, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, with distended eyeballs. "I jes' fink dat we'se in luck to git away fom dem Rustlers as safely as we did."

"You are right, Pomp!" agreed Frank.

"And much is due you for your pluck in cutting their lassoes."

"Bejabers, the nayger did a good job," averred Barney.

This put Pomp in the best of spirits.

It had been really a very plucky act, and the escape of the party was no doubt due to it.

The Steam Man now kept on to the northward.

It was not long before the plain began to become more rolling, and, after a time, mountains were seen to the northwest.

As these were neared, a clump of cottonwoods was seen, not more than three miles distant.

To the left of them were what looked at that distance to be buildings.

"It is a ranch, I will stake my life!" declared Frank. "Well, let us go over and see what sort of a place it is."

The Steam Man was headed for the distant ranch.

Very soon it became quite plain to the eye.

There were a number of rambling buildings and stock yards. The main ranch was surrounded by a high fence, with a heavy gate.

This was open, and over it was a sign which read:

"Ranch A."

Frank drove the Steam Man straight up to the gate.

Nobody was in sight outside, so he sent the Man through the gate and into the yard.

A half dozen cowboys were hanging about the yard, and upon the piazza sat two men and a lady.

The appearance of the Steam Man was a startling surprise to the inmates of the ranch.

The cowboys were instantly upon their feet, and picked up their weapons.

But the Steam Man came to a halt in the center of the yard, and Frank, leaping out of the cage, held up his hands.

"We are friends!" he cried. "Have no fear."

The cowboys instantly came up and crowded about the Man.

The two men on the piazza of the ranch came down quickly, while the lady, who was seen to be a very beautiful young girl, sprang up and looked surprised and startled.

"Wall, by jingo!" cried one of the cowboys; "what kind of machine do ye call that, anyway?"

"It is a a Steam Man," replied Frank.

"It's ther make up of a man—yes! But does it go by steam?"

"Yes."

"Like a reg'lar locomotive?"

"Just the same."

"Only ye don't have any track?"

"Exactly."

"Wall, I swan! that's a good one, ain't it, boys?"

All agreed that the Steam Man was a wonder.

Frank saw that these men were not of the

desperate type which he had met with a short time before.

Indeed, the men who had been upon the piazza now saluted him hospitably.

One was a stout, bronzed-featured gentleman of sixty years. The other was a young man, and straight and handsome as Apollo.

Both were clearly men of education and refinement.

"Sir, I am glad to welcome you to Ranch A," said the elderly gentleman. "I am the owner of this ranch and my name is Hiram Dane."

"Thank you," replied Frank, warmly. "Pardon my intrusion, but I was going by and dropped in, by Western courtesy, without an invitation."

"You are very welcome."

"My name is Frank Reade, Jr., and I am making a little exploring trip through this region."

"Good! you must no doubt enjoy traveling in this unique invention of yours?"

"I do, very much."

Then Frank proceeded to describe the mechanism of the Steam Man. All listened with much interest.

He then introduced Barney and Pomp to the ranch owner, and was in turn introduced to the young man, whose name was given as Lester Willis.

He was a young New Yorker just from Yale College, and spending a season of rest on the ranch, being, in fact, engaged to the beautiful daughter of Hiram Dane, who was no other than the charming young lady upon the piazza.

After some social converse, Frank was invited to a seat upon the piazza and was made acquainted with Miss Eva.

In the course of the conversation Frank told of his experience with the Rustlers.

The ranch people evinced much interest and fear.

"Do you know," said Mr. Dane, with much apprehension, "I have been dreading an attack from those wretches for some time."

CHAPTER III.

AT SUNRISE.

"INDEED!" exclaimed Frank. "What would be their purpose in attacking you?"

"Well, partly plunder and partly hatred. You see, they have a bitter dislike for the eastern ranch-owner. They consider us monopolists and aristocrats."

"They certainly are a desperate class of men."

"So I am given to understand. I am horrified to learn that they are so near us."

"It was not forty miles back that I encountered them."

"Heavens! then we might expect an attack from them at any time. It is well to be on our guard."

"I would advise you to," said Frank, earnestly.

"Oh, I think it would be terrible," said Eva Dane, covering her pretty face with her hands; "what shall we do, papa?"

A shiver passed over the old man's frame as he exchanged glances with Willis.

The same thoughts ran in the minds of both.

"Perhaps it would be well to seek refuge in Fort McKinney for a while," said Willis, gravely.

"You may be right, Lester," agreed the ranch owner. "And yet it is a bad time for me to leave. You and Eva had better go."

"And leave you here?" cried Eva, in terror.

"Oh, no. If harm should come to you, papa, I should die."

"It is not well to borrow trouble yet," said Frank Reade, Jr., encouragingly. "All may come out well."

"Let us hope so," said Mr. Dane, *sotto voce*. Frank spent some time at Ranch A, even accepting a cordial invitation to stay to dinner.

Then he took leave of the place and was soon once more out upon the wild waste of prairie.

The Steam Man kept on at a rapid pace. At nightfall a small settlement was reached at the foot of a range of hills.

This was a sort of mining camp more than aught else.

It boasted of some two dozen rough shanties, several dugouts and a two-story log hotel.

Sunrise was the very fitting name of this embryo metropolis.

Its residents were all of the mixed class, so commonly found in mining localities, men of all nations and creeds, but all with the one purpose in view, and that of gaining wealth at any cost.

Gamblers and toughs abounded in Sunrise. Indeed, morally, the town had a decidedly bad reputation.

But Frank considered it worth while to visit the place on his tour of exploration, and accordingly a stop was made.

The denizens of Sunrise were dumfounded at the apparition of the Steam Man in their midst.

They regarded it with deepest wonder, and the voyagers were looked upon as beings not of the common sort.

As the Steam Man drew up at the hotel, a rough-looking structure, the proprietor came out.

He was a powerful fellow, and wore a red shirt and rough boots of cowhide.

Over the door of the hotel was a sign:

"LOONEY'S HOTEL."

"Hello, strangers!" shouted the hotelkeeper, cheerily. "Moughty glad to see ye. Won't ye put yer animal up an' stop a while?"

Frank explained that they made their quarters aboard the Steam Man and had no use for hotels.

"That's all right, friends!" cried the tavern-keeper, affably. "Jes' thought I'd ask, ye know. No offense. This is my hotel an' my name is Pat Looney. Call agin at any time. Will be glad to see ye."

The genial landlord disappeared behind the greasy bar of the place, and began serving up cheap drinks to the denizens as unconcerned as ever.

Frank selected a place in a vacant lot near, and here camp was made.

Darkness had now settled down over the town thickly.

Pomp cooked an appetizing supper.

It was partaken of readily by the three voyagers.

A crowd loitered about still regarding the wonderful invention with curiosity.

After the supper Frank said:

"Which one of you wants to go over to the hotel with me and study human nature for a while?"

Barney looked up eagerly, but a sudden recollection came to him.

"Begorra, it's the naygur's turn," he declared, honestly. "Shure I'll sthaye an' kape house this time."

It was Pomp's turn, fair enough, and the darky did not decline.

"Golly sakes, I'se jes' glad enough fo' to go, Marse Frank," he said, with alacrity. "Jes' yo' wait a bit."

Pomp got himself up to kill with a checked suit and flaring necktie with all the colors of the rainbow.

He was quite a nifty-looking darky when, a few moments later, he stepped down from the wagon and joined Frank.

The truth was, Pomp had seen a number of trim-looking colored damsels in the place.

At once he was interested.

He might not have the opportunity to get acquainted with them, but at least he could give them an idea of style.

So he dressed himself with scrupulous care. All the while Barney geyed him.

But this did not affect the darky to any great extent.

"Huh!" he granted. "De berry reason why yo' don't dress up, I'sh, am because yo' ain't got de togs."

"Begorra, I'd go about with am Adam suit on afore I'd wear them things," retorted Barney.

"Dey am bettah style dan any finy yo'se got, I'sh."

"G'long wid yez."

"Yah, yah, yo'se no 'count."

"Bejabers, I'll show yez."

The Celt started for the darky, but Pomp was too quick for him.

He was out of the cage in a flash and joined Frank.

Together they walked up the village street, and Pomp particularly was the cynosure of all eyes.

This tickled his vanity and he strutted along in great style.

"Hah!" he muttered. "I jes' reckon dis town am about two hundred years behind de times."

At this moment in the full glare of a lamp they met a colored lass.

Pomp braced, the girl averted her face and giggled. The darky lifted his hat gallantly, and Frank said:

"None of that, Pomp. You must be pretty careful about making acquaintances in a strange place."

"Fo' goodness sakes, Marse Frank!" cried the frustrated darky. "I jes' done dat fo' to be polite, yo' know. Yo' wudn't hab me be rade to de ladies?"

"Not for the world," said Frank, with suppressed laughter.

They now passed into the bar-room of the hotel.

Neither Frank nor Pomp drank strong liquor, but they bought some cigars and then proceeded to take a look about the place.

Few who have never been in a Western bar-room of this class can get an adequate idea of it from description.

All classes of men were drinking at the bar. The floor was sawdust covered, and reeked with tobacco expectorations.

Sporting pictures of the loudest type covered the walls.

At tables, scattered about, tough-looking gamblers were engaged in fleecing the unsophisticated miners.

It was a scene which for its motley character and unique aspects was never equaled by any delineation of slum life from even the gifted brain of a Dickens.

Frank gazed upon the scene curiously.

Pomp, however, was interested in the games of chance at once.

For a time he watched the manipulations of the pasteboards.

Then he turned and wandered to the bar.

He drew quite close to the bar and began to study a picture which hung over it.

Frank watched him with a smile, for he began to anticipate the fun which shortly followed.

Pomp was lost in abstraction over the picture.

He did not notice a besotted fellow who stood beside him, and who gave the bartender a wink.

The bartender glanced at Pomp and asked sharply:

"What is it—whisky straight?"

Pomp did not hear a word said, but his head nodded a trifle in his contemplation of the picture.

"What's yours?" asked the bartender of the besotted chap.

"Medford rum," replied the fellow, with a twinkling of the eye.

The bartender poured out the drinks, and set the whisky down before Pomp.

The sot drained the other glass, and then stood dreamily contemplating a row of bottles upon the shelf.

"Come," said the bartender, sharply, slapping Pomp on the shoulder "Wake up and down with your oil. There's others waiting their turn."

"What yo' say, sah?" exclaimed Pomp, staring at the whisky and then at the bartender.

"Drink yer flip!"

"Drink it? but, sah, yo' am mistaken. I didn't odah any drink, sah."

"Yes you did, too, and you treated your friend here."

"Mah friend!"

Pomp turned aghast and viewed the sot by his side.

"Why, I never seen dat feller afo' in all mah life!" he declared.

The bartender feigned anger.

"That game won't work here," he cried, angrily. "Pay for dem drinks or I'll jug yer. See?"

He gave Pomp a savage leer. But the darky did not scare.

He was justly indignant.

The sot looked up with a sickly smile and said:

"P'raps I didn't do right in drinkin' wid a stranger. But I couldn't afford to decline, ye know."

"Golly! I neber axed yo' to drink wif me," cried Pomp, angrily. "Yo' jes' get out ob here, or I break yo' jaw."

"Oh, cert," replied the sot, and he melted away out of sight.

"Now, sah," said Pomp, turning to the bartender, "if yo' gib dat man a drink, yo' jes' did it on yo' own responsingbility, an' not on mine. Yo' kin git yo' pay jes' de bes' way yo' sees fit."

"Why, you goldurned cantankerous nigger, you!" roared the bartender; "do you think you kin play that beat game here? You'll pay for them drinks, or I'll take it out of your hide."

"Golly, p'raps yo' better try dat," replied Pomp, coolly. "Dat would be a 'mazin' big contract fo' a lily man like yo'."

"Do ye mean to say I can't do it?" roared the infuriated barkeeper.

CHAPTER IV.

POMP DOES HIS MAN UP.

"I MEANS ebery wo'd I say, sah," replied Pomp, coolly.

"Will ye pay for them drinks or not?"

"No."

The bartender placed one hand on the bar and went over it.

He confronted Pomp after the manner of a prize fighter.

"Now, you cussed nigger," he roared "if you don't pay for that liquor I'll take your heart out."

"I'll neber pay fo' dat I neber had," replied Pomp, coolly.

Quite a crowd surrounded the two disputants. Loud cries of approval went up.

"Don't ye be afraid of him, nig."

"Go in an' win."

"Give him a duff in the jaw."

"Ye're good fer him."

These were the exclamations, which were excited. Pomp seemed to have the sympathy of the crowd.

Moreover, he kept his head perfectly cool all the while.

"You know you ordered that liquor and you oughter pay for it," declared the bartender.

"I neber did it, sah."

"Do you mean that?"

"Yes, sah."

"Then ye're a black liar."

"Ki dar! look out how yo' call me names like dat," threatened Pomp. "I'll break yo' right in two."

"You will, eh?"

The bartender rolled up his sleeves.

He was a short, square built fellow of the bull-dog type of man. Certainly he was a cordy fellow.

"Now, nigger, if you don't pay for that liquor I'll spoil that Sunday suit of yers. Say the word."

"Look yer, Mister Man," said Pomp, emphatically, "don't yo' make no mistakes. Yo' am pickin' up de wrong chile entirely. Put yo' han's on me at yo' peril."

But the bartender was angry, and, moreover, felt that a back-down now would be a disgrace.

So he drew back and let Pomp have a drive full in the chest.

"Ugh!" grunted the darky. Then what followed was like a kaleidoscopic affair to the spectators.

Pomp lowered his head quick as lightning and dove for his antagonist.

The bartender made another whack at him, but he could not resist that powerful rush.

The darky's head took him full in the stomach.

The crowd fell back, and the fellow, like a shot out of a catapult, was fairly driven full force under a table.

He fell with such tremendous force that for a moment he was quite unable to arise.

When he did crawl out from the place, he was so battered and bruised that he could not continue the fight.

The crowd roared and cheered Pomp to a man.

"Good fer you, nig!"

"Ye did well."

"Ye're a real slugger."

"He ain't in it."

But now Pat Looney, the proprietor, came angrily upon the scene.

"What's all this?" he roared. "Give me a hand here. Gold durn ye, ye pesky nigger, what are ye gittin' up a row in here fer?"

"Hol' on, dar," said Pomp. "I ain' de man to blame."

"Who is, then?"

"Dat bartender ob yourn. He tried to make me pay fo' drinks dat I didn' ordah, sah."

"He wouldn't do that," thundered Looney.

"Pay fo' the drinks, an' no foolin'."

"Hold on!"

It was a stern voice.

Frank Reade, Jr., pushed through the crowd. He confronted Looney.

"I saw it all," he said, sternly. "My man did not order the drinks."

With an oath Looney pulled a revolver. But before he could lift it another covered him.

"Hold right where you are," said Frank in a voice of thunder, "I'll drop you in a minute if you don't apologize for this conduct. I have the drop."

"Good for you, stranger!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"He's right, Looney."

"Yer bartender did try the snide."

"I seen him do it."

"So did I."

Looney glared into the muzzle of Frank's pistol with passion distorted face.

Like all villains he was a coward.

He saw that the bluff would not work.

The sentiment of the crowd was against him. Reluctantly he returned his pistol to his belt.

"All right, stranger," he said, sullenly. "If my man did that he's to blame, in course. I back down."

Frank coolly pocketed his pistol and said to Pomp:

"Come, let us go out."

But at this moment the clatter of hoofs were heard outside.

A horse came to a stop outside the door and a man burst into the place.

He was a cowboy, and his person was a sight to behold.

He was covered with blood from head to foot. His buckskin suit was torn and riddled with rifle balls.

His face was pale as death, and rushing to the middle of the floor, he cried in a loud voice:

"Is Mister Frank Reade, Jr., here?"

There was an instant of dead silence and then Frank stepped forward.

"He is!"

"Are you the gent?"

"I am," replied Frank.

The cowboy tottered to a chair and sank into it.

"I'm nigh done out," he said, huskily, "but I came with all speed on your trail."

"Indeed!"

"I came from Ranch A."

A chill of horror came over Frank. With pale face he interrogated:

"Well—what—what is it?"

"Mr. Dane sent me at the last moment. The Rustlers have attacked the place, nigh all our men have been killed off, and the place was afire when I left. Dane sent me for you to get—help—"

The poor fellow sank back in a dead faint.

"My God!" cried Frank in thrilled tones,

"this is horrible. Listen, all you men of honest hearts and brave souls. Ranch A has been attacked by Rustlers. Help must go down there at once. Now, who among you will go with me?"

A chorus of hearty voices responded.

Whisky had been given the wounded cowboy and he was recovering.

Frank led the way out into the night. A large crowd of men followed.

They were rough fellows the most of them, but honest hearted miners were among them, and these were ever ready to respond to duty's call.

Frank thought with a sense of power of the pleasant people he had met at Ranch A.

He thought of the young girl Eva Dane, and what would be her fate if she fell into the hands of the Rustlers.

It fired his whole soul, and he felt like daring any danger to go to the rescue.

In less time than it takes to tell it, the vigilant band was organized.

Fully fifty armed men on horseback were in front of the hotel ready to start in a brief space of time.

Pomp had gone down to the Steam Man. Frank joined them a moment later.

Then the Steam Man started out across the plains toward Ranch A.

The Vigilants followed behind at a swinging gallop.

The Man's headlights lit up the prairie, and Frank had no trouble in seeing his course.

But the distance was great, being full fifty miles.

The Steam Man might have made this distance much quicker.

But it was daylight before they had covered it. Even then many of the horses had dropped out from exhaustion.

Topping a rise in the prairie, Frank saw a great column of smoke rising in the air.

"My God!" he groaned; "that comes from the ranch. I fear we shall find nothing but the ruins."

His fears proved to be not without foundation.

A short while later the site of Ranch A was in full sight.

Of all the buildings nought was left save a pile of ashes and a column of smoke.

It was a most horrible reflection, yet it could not be gainsaid.

Not a living being was in sight.

One thought flashed through the minds of all.

Had not the Rustlers massacred everybody, and would not the bodies be found in the ashes?

If so—Frank set his teeth firmly.

His acquaintance with the people of Ranch A had been brief, but it was sufficient to cause him to feel a powerful interest in them.

If the Rustlers had done them harm the Steam Man would be given a mission.

That mission would be one of revenge.

The Steam Man reached the ruins of the ranch long before the tired horses of the Vigilants.

It was discovered to be too true that the ranch had been reduced to ashes and its inmates slaughtered.

There were evidences in plenty that a terrific battle had been fought.

Dead bodies were strewn about the place or half consumed in the ashes.

Presently the Vigilants came up.

An examination of the vicinity was at once made.

Then it was decided necessary to camp for some hours, as the horses were completely done out.

The trail of the Rustlers was discovered leading to the northwest and toward the Big Horn Mountains.

Frank caused all of the bodies found to be examined.

But happily the bodies of Hiram Dane and his daughter or of Lester Willis were not found.

"They have either escaped or been taken away as prisoners," Frank concluded. "We must rescue them."

A consultation was held with the Vigilants.

It was decided unanimously to stick to the trail of the Rustlers until they should be run down and brought to justice.

"We will stay in it to the end," said bluff Joe Brigham, the leader. "If ye'll lead the way with the Steam Man we'll follow ye."

"I will do that," averred Frank.

Three hours gave the horses a fair rest. Then the start was made.

The trail was taken from the spot and followed all that day.

At nightfall it had reached the mountains and was lost.

CHAPTER V.

DUPED.

THE trail was lost upon reaching the mountains, owing to the flinty character of the soil.

But it was plain that if the Rustlers had entered the hills they must be there yet.

So it was decided to give them a thorough search.

Of course, the Steam Man could not travel over such rough ground, so it was decided that the Man should wait until after the Vigilants had driven the Rustlers from the hills.

This it was hoped to do.

Accordingly Joe Brigham and his man galloped into the hills.

They were soon out of sight.

All that our adventurers could do now was to sit still and await their return.

Time passed dully enough.

Frank had descended from the cage and was pacing up and down in a reverie, when suddenly a sharp cry escaped Pomp's lips:

"Wha' am dat, Marse Frank? Look out fo' yo'self."

Frank gave a violent start.

Just at that moment, around a bend in the line of timber which fringed the base of the mountains, there came a horseman.

He was a cowboy and bestrode a mustang. But his manner was that of a man thoroughly exhausted.

His clothing was torn and mud-stained, and he seemed hardly able to sit in the saddle.

At sight of the Steam Man he steered directly toward it.

As he came up Frank cried:

"Hello, stranger! Who are you?"

The cowboy drew rein, and in a hoarse voice replied:

"I am a friend. I am Cal Sims, and I was boss cowboy for Hiram Dane at Ranch A. We were attacked by Rustlers last night, and I barely escaped with my life."

"Heavens!" exclaimed Frank; "you don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. Can't you give a fellow a little help?"

"Come right in. We will do all we can for you."

The cowboy reined his horse into camp and dropped from the saddle.

He appeared to be utterly exhausted, but a little whisky and some food revived him.

He was a wiry-built, dark complexioned fellow with piercing eyes.

Ordinarily, Frank would not have considered his appearance as over prepossessing.

But as he was one of Dane's men, he concluded that he must be all right.

Cal Sims detailed explicitly the affair at the ranch.

"I kin tell ye it was a terrible fight," he declared. "I reckon I'm the only man as escaped alive."

"But Mr. Dane and his daughter and young Willis—"

The fellow's eyes snapped strangely, as he replied:

"Oh, I reckon they warn't killed. They war taken away to be held by ransom, I take it."

"Ah! then if they are alive we may be able to rescue them."

"Yes," said the cowboy, with a peculiar shrug of the shoulders.

Presently he advanced and began making a cursory examination of the Steam Man.

"What a curus machine ye've got here," he declared.

"Yes, rather," replied Frank.

"How do ye run it? Ah! them reins connects with the throttle, eh?"

"Yes."

The fellow proceeded to carefully examine the Steam Man. Then he turned away and cast himself upon the greensward near.

It was fast growing dark.

The shades of night were settling down thick and fast.

Frank and Barney were reclining upon the ground near, and waiting anxiously for some sound which would warn them of the return of Joe Brigham and his men.

Pomp had been busy in the cage.

But he now left it with a pail in his hand to get some water at the spring near by.

The cowboy, Cal Sims, walked carelessly over to the Steam Man.

Pomp had reached the spring some fifty feet away.

Suddenly Frank and Barney witnessed a thrilling act and one which they were powerless to avert.

The cowboy, Sims, suddenly made a leap forward and into the cage.

The door closed behind him, and he sprang to the dasher.

Frank saw his purpose, and a wild cry of alarm escaped his lips.

"Stop him! Don't let him get the start!"

The young inventor sprang for the throttle rein of the Man.

But before any could reach it, Sims had pulled the valve open, and the Man sprang away.

Out upon the prairie he went at top speed.

"Ha—ha—ha!" came back the taunting laugh from the villain who had so skillfully duped them. "You have been nicely fooled! Didn't know who Cal Sims was, did ye? Well, he's the chief of the Rustlers. Ha—ha—ha!"

Frank was paralyzed with the realization that the Steam Man was really in the power of the foe.

What should they do?

It was an agonizing moment.

It was certainly folly to attempt to overtake the Steam Man.

The jaded mustang could not do it certainly. For a moment the three outwitted travelers looked at each other blankly.

"Duped!" cried Frank. "We are in a nice position now."

No calamity of worse sort could possibly have befallen them.

The Steam Man was soon out of sight around the base of the mountain.

"Golly!" spluttered Pomp, "dat am de wors' fing I eber heerd tell ob."

"Begorra, av I had that rascal be the nape av the neck now I'd mighty soon fix him!" declared Barney.

"But we have not, nor are we likely to catch him at once," declared Frank, grimly.

Fortunately their rifles had been left outside the wagon, also some ammunition.

There was but one thing to do, and this was to follow slowly the course taken by the Rustler chief.

If they had luck they would be sure to overtake him sooner or later.

Then it would be in order to devise some plan by which to recapture the Man.

Certainly nothing was to be gained by remaining idly here. At once they set out upon their mission.

It was more than likely that Sims would go at once to the camp of the Rustlers.

Where this was they had no means of knowing, but if it was in an inaccessible place the Steam Man certainly could not go there.

"Well," muttered Frank, resolutely, "we will recover the Man if they do not destroy it."

On foot they set out along the base of the mountain range.

For hours they tramped on.

It was near midnight when Pomp suddenly paused and exclaimed:

"Golly! What ebber would yo' call dat, Marse Frank?"

"What?"

"Jes' yo' look ober dar."

Frank looked up the mountain side. There

was visible a broad face of a cliff rendered as plain as day by firelight being thrown upon it.

"It looks like a camp-fire," declared Frank, studying it carefully. "It will be well to look it up."

Accordingly the three adventurers began to climb the mountain.

Up they went for some ways, and then came to dense trees.

Frank set a course for the fire, and plunged into the thick woods.

For an hour they kept on, and seemed helplessly lost in the place, when the glimmer of firelight was seen just ahead.

Endowed with fresh hope they kept on.

The light grew larger as they progressed. It was evidently a large camp-fire, for forms were seen moving back and forward in a fire-lit circle.

"It is the Rustlers' camp," declared Frank, positively.

"Golly! I hope it is," cried Pomp.

"Bejabers, so do I," said Barney.

They kept on pluckily through the thick undergrowth.

Soon it became necessary to move with the greatest of care.

Undoubtedly the enemy would have a picket guard out.

But soon a point was reached, from which every part of the camp could be seen.

Fully a hundred of the "Rustlers" were in the place.

They were in various positions of ease, and some were engaged in eating or cooking their evening meal over the fire.

But the Steam Man was not in sight.

Evidently Sims had not yet arrived with it.

It was more than possible that he had been unable to get up to the camp with the Steam Man.

Suddenly Barney clutched Frank's arm and exclaimed:

"Whisht now, Mither Frank, wud yez luk at that over yender by the big tree."

Frank's gaze caught the same sight at that moment as Barney's had.

Sitting in the shadows, bound securely hands and feet, were three prisoners.

It needed but a glance for Frank to recognize them.

They were the former residents at Ranch A, Mr. Hiram Dane, Miss Eva and young Willis.

The prisoners seemed in a most despondent mood. Frank could see that Eva was very pale.

At once a daring idea entered Frank's mind.

Why not attempt their rescue?

It certainly was not an impossible feat, and yet he was prone to admit that it was coupled with a certain amount of risk.

But Frank was possessed of an intrepid spirit.

Whenever he made up his mind to a deed he seldom abandoned it through any fear of consequences.

Accordingly he whispered:

"Barney, I am going to try and pull those people out of this scrape."

"Shure, Mither Frank, do yez think it possible?"

"Of course I do."

"Shure, an' how wud yez do it?"

"I can hardly say as yet, but I think if I could get in back of them in some way I might crawl up and cut their bonds."

"Bejabers, I don't know but what yez can, Mither Frank."

"At least, I shall try."

"Whisht now, sor!"

"What?"

"An' phwat shall we do, sor?"

"Remain here until I return," said Frank, as he glided away.

CHAPTER VI.

THE RESCUE.

FRANK was much in earnest in his purpose.

Of course he might fail, or he might find it impossible to carry it through on safe grounds.

But he was determined to try.

Leaving Barney and Pomp, he crept away through the undergrowth.

With the greatest of care he made a circuit of the camp.

To his surprise and great joy, he made one important discovery.

This was that the Rustlers had not established any picket guard.

Or at least if they had, Frank could see nothing of him, and was not at all troubled to make his circuit of the camp.

Having gained a point in the rear of the captives, he began to study the possibility of effecting a rescue.

The Rustlers seemed to be giving their prisoners little heed.

The most of them were holding high carousal with cards and wine.

It was certainly a favorably opportunity and Frank embraced it.

He crept cautiously down to the very edge of the camp.

He was now not ten feet from the bound prisoners.

There seemed not a man near to balk him in his plans.

Waiting for a favorable moment he raised his voice in a high whisper:

"Sh! Friends are near you! Keep up good courage!"

Hiram Dane gave a violent start, and color came into the girl's face.

Lester Willis turned his head eagerly for a moment.

Then all remembered the danger of the moment and were guarded and quiet.

Frank now began to make his way slowly and cautiously nearer.

There was a great risk in the move he was making.

He was obliged to cross a short pathway of light, and had any of the Rustlers chanced to glance in that direction he must have been seen.

But fortune seemed to favor the young inventor.

Flat upon his stomach like a snake he made his way to the big tree.

He held a keen knife in his right hand. It was but an instant's work to reach around the tree and cut the bonds which secured Mr. Dane's wrists and ankles.

The ranch owner was free.

Frank said in a whisper:

"Do not move until I have liberated the others. Then watch your chance and slip quietly into the forest."

The Rustlers were so engrossed in their carousal that they had not noticed the prisoners for some time.

This laxity was no doubt due to the fact that Sims, their leader, was not present.

As the reader knows he was far out on the plain with the Steam Man.

Of course all this favored Frank immensely.

The young inventor next proceeded to cut Eva's bonds. Then he liberated young Willis and the work was done.

Withdrawing to the shadows Frank awaited developments.

In a few moments Mr. Dane rolled over into the shadows and joined him.

Eva and Willis followed, all unnoticed by the cowboys.

Frank led the way hastily up the mountain side.

Then pausing, he said:

"I shall have to leave you here."

"So soon?" exclaimed Mr. Dane.

"Yes. Barney and Pomp are waiting for me just below."

"Will you not join us again?"

"I hardly think it likely. I would advise you to strike out at once deeper into the hills and go into hiding for a time. I think you will run across Joe Brigham and the Vigilants."

And then Frank detailed the loss of the Steam Man.

"You see, it is necessary for me to recover my invention," he said.

"Certainly!" cried Mr. Dane. "You have done enough for us. You must accept our undying gratitude, and I can assure you that I shall try to repay the favor some day."

"Do not speak of it," said Frank. "Now

keep straight on into the hills. I am sure that you will find Brigham."

With this they separated.

The rescued party went on into the hills by Frank's direction.

* Frank himself started back to find Barney and Pomp.

This proved to be no easy job.

He crept through the undergrowth cautiously, and reached the spot where he was sure he had left them.

To his amazement and disappointment they were not there.

At this moment also, a thrilling thing occurred.

The outlaw camp seemed suddenly thrown into a state of wildest confusion.

The truth was, the escape of the prisoners had been discovered.

Frank instantly realized that the vicinity would speedily get too hot for him.

But what was he to do?

He did not like to leave until he had learned the fate of Barney and Pomp.

Where had they gone?

While trying to solve this problem he waited too long in the vicinity.

Suddenly dark forms surrounded him.

"Hands up, stranger!" said a voice.

Frank's desperate impulse was to flee the spot.

But a half dozen powerful foes were upon him in a moment, and in a twinkling he was bound hand and foot.

Then he was carried into the camp by his captors.

Loud cries went up.

"Thunder and blazes! that's the feller that has the Steam Man."

"Hyar's a big catch!"

"What'll the boss say?"

"Like enough he had suthin' to do with the escape of them prisoners."

Frank was surrounded by his excited foes.

He knew that the woods swarmed with these villains in quest of the escaped prisoners.

Frank's sensations may be better imagined than described.

"By Jupiter!" he muttered. "I'm in for it now, sure."

The cowboys seemed much elated at their capture.

But one thing gave Frank a bit of satisfaction.

They had not captured Barney and Pomp. Frank knew well that as long as these faithful fellows had their liberty, they would not cease to attempt his rescue.

The cowboys jibed and tormented the prisoner for awhile.

Then he was left to his own ruminations in the center of the camp.

Only a dozen of the Rustlers were left to guard the camp.

The others were all out in quest of the escaped prisoners.

Frank was indulging in reflections of a somewhat moody character, when one of the cowboys approached him.

"Wall, stranger," he said, in a bantering tone, "ye put yer foot in it this time, didn't yer?"

"I have been unfortunate," was Frank's reply.

"Do ye know whar them prisoners are?"

"I have no means of knowing."

"Didn't ye set 'em free?"

"I don't care to answer that question."

"Putty close-mouthed, ain't yer?"

"There is no law to compel any man to speak when he don't want to," said Frank, coolly.

"Oh, ther ain't, eh?"

"Never heard of one."

"So yer Frank Reade, Jr., eh?"

"That's my name."

"Putty big inventor, ain't yer?"

"That is not for me to say."

"That Steam Man of your'n is quite a trick, ain't it?"

"It is a good machine."

"It goes all by steam, does it?"

"Yes."

"How fast kin it go?"

Frank was getting intensely wearied of this style of conversation. He looked at his interlocutor penetratingly and said:

"If that's all you've got to say to me, let's end the talk here."

The fellow's face flushed.

"Humph! putty independent, ain't ye?" he exclaimed.

"Perhaps so."

"Ye can't hardly afford to be so long as ye're a kind of a prisoner."

"I don't know about that."

"Do ye know the boys have got a hard grudge agin ye?"

"Indeed!"

"I think they mean to hang ye."

Frank's lip curled scornfully.

"That does not intimidate me."

"It don't, eh?"

"No."

The fellow expectorated a big quantity of tobacco juice and leered at Frank.

"That's all right. I've seen many a chap like you. They're all grit till they git the noose right over their necks. Then they weaken."

"Look here," said Frank, desperately. "Do you want to talk me to death and cheat the hangman?"

The fellow guffawed immoderately.

"Wall," he said, rising to his feet, "I'll give ye a bit of a chance. So long. I'll see ye later."

He strolled away, and for a time Frank was left to his own reflections.

The young inventor had not given up wholly to despair.

He kept constantly hoping that Brigham and his men would show up at an opportune moment.

But they did not seem to come that way.

Had they chanced upon the outlaw camp at that moment, they would have had little difficulty in defeating the cowboys.

But they did not come.

Time passed, and the cowboys who had gone in pursuit of the escaped prisoners did not return.

Frank wondered much what had become of Pomp and Barney.

Daylight was now close at hand.

Even Sims did not show up, and Frank saw that the Rustlers were getting uneasy.

They held a consultation, a part of which Frank overheard.

"I tell ye what," said one of them, "I'm gettin' skeery. It's time that we made some kind of a move."

"Better wait till Cal comes," said another.

"But p'raps he won't come."

"Oh, yes, he will."

"I tell ye, let's take a vote on it. Shall we move or not?"

A vote was taken.

It was overwhelming'y decided that the party should move.

The result was very important, so far as Frank was concerned.

One of the Rustlers went to a tree near and threw a rope over a limb.

Then two others advanced and cut the bonds about Frank's feet.

He was led beneath the tree and one of the Rustlers said:

"Now, stranger, say yer prayers. We hev decided to hang ye rather than to take ye along with us."

Frank was very calm.

"Why do you seek my life?" he asked.

"You are an enemy."

"What have I done to harm you?"

"We had a scrap with you which you well remember. You killed quite a number of our men."

"But that was in self-defense."

"It's all ther same. Say yer prayers an' git ready to die."

Frank knew that it was useless to make any protest.

He was in the hands of desperate men with whom argument did not count.

So he allowed them to slip the noose over his head.

It tightened about his neck.

One of the Rustlers raised his hand and asked:

"Are ye ready?"

Frank nodded his head.

The next moment the men at the end of the rope gave way.

Frank Reade, Jr.'s body went up into the air and he swung in space.

CHAPTER VII.

RECOVERY OF THE STEAM MAN.

BUT what had become of Barney and Pomp? It will be remembered that while Frank was liberating the prisoners in the Rustlers' camp, the two faithful servitors were waiting his return in the undergrowth.

Time passed, and both saw the young inventor when he cut Hiram Dane's bonds.

"Golly!" whispered Pomp, "I jes' hopes Marse Frank will hab good luck wif dem chaps."

"Bejabors, so do I," agreed Barney.

"If dem Rustlers don' see him now he will get dem off scot free fo' suah."

"Begorra, that's roight."

The two servitors watched Frank's movements intently.

Suddenly Barney gave a start.

"What the devil is that, naygur?"

"Sh! dar am a lot ob de rapscallions comin' dis way," whispered Pomp.

This was true.

What had attracted them was not easy to say, but a number of the Rustlers were beating the bushes near where the two men crouched.

"Golly!" muttered Pomp. "I jes' guess we're in fo' it."

"That's thrue, shure."

"What will we do, I'ish?"

"Begorra, I don't know."

The Rustlers were evidently making a search of the bushes.

Suddenly the voice of one was heard:

"Are you sure, Bill, that ye seen any one in hyar?"

"Dead sure, Jim."

"It mought have been one of our own men."

"Not a bit of it. I tell ye there's skulkers around hyar to-night."

"Well, by Jupiter, if thar is, we must find em."

"In course we must."

Barney and Pomp knew that it would be the height of folly to remain longer in the place.

It was the safest and best way to get out of the vicinity at once.

They were desirous of reaching Frank and also warning him of the danger.

But there was no way of doing this.

All that they could do was to beat a retreat, and suddenly Barney's foot caught in a wire and he fell.

He was almost instantly seen by the foe.

They at once gave hot pursuit.

Down through the woods the chase went. But the two fugitives had a good start and distanced their pursuers.

They were now in a deep valley among high hills.

The chase had been conducted at random.

Cut off at many turns they had been obliged to pursue a course which was most deviating and perplexing.

So that really they hardly knew now where they were.

To attempt to return to the camp of the Rustlers was almost impossible.

"Golly!" cried Pomp. "I'se just about concluded dat we'se lost, I'ish."

"Thrue enough, naygur."

"My wo'd fo' it. What will Marse Frank say?"

"Begorra, I don't know. Shure, av he returns for us it's captured he'll be by the omadhouns."

"I reckon dat am jes' a fac'."

The two faithful fellows were much distressed with this reflection.

But there seemed no way out of the difficulty now.

It would seem to be too late to return to the camp now, even had they been able to do so.

As a result they wandered around aimlessly for a while.

It was just daybreak when they finally came out at the base of the mountains and in a long valley which extended down to the plains.

Through this ran a stream.

Barney and Pomp crept down to it and slaked their thirst in a cooling draught.

They were now in very much of a quandary. What to do was a perfect enigma to them.

They cast themselves down upon the green-sward by the brookside.

"Be Saint Michael!" quoth Barney, "we must be ather doin' av somethin' desperate yet, naygur. Phwativer shall it be?"

"I jes' don' know nuffin' 'tall about it," replied Pomp, despairingly.

"Shure av Mistler Frank is in the power av thim vilyuns we must rescue him in some way."

"Pr'aps yo' kin tell ob some way, I'ish?"

"Bejabors, I can't that, an' that's phwy I feel so loike a fool."

Barney had been lying upon his side on the green grass.

His gaze had wandered to the verge of the clump of trees upon the banks of the same stream a short way below.

Suddenly he sprang up with a startled cry.

"Be me sowl, phwativer is that?"

"What am dat yo' say?"

"Wid yez luk at that?"

Pomp followed the direction indicated by Barney with his eye.

He gave a great start.

Above the clump of trees there rose a high column of smoke.

What did it mean?

Was it a camp fire?

The two fugitives exchanged startled and wondering glances.

"I'll tell ye what!" cried Pomp, "we'se gwine to look dat up."

"All roight, naygur."

No sooner said than done. The two servitors started away along the banks of the creek.

They proceeded cautiously, for, far aught they knew, a foe might be near and on the watch.

But as they drew nearer they became impressed with the fact that the smoke column looked more like that from a chimney than aught else.

"That's very quare!" thought Barney.

Then a stifled cry escaped his lips.

"Be me sowl!" he gasped. "It's the Steam Man."

This was a certain fact.

The Man stood puffing upon the bank of the creek.

Cal Sims, the Rustler chief, and the sole occupant of the cage, was just descending from it.

He had the connecting hose in his hand, with which water was usually pumped into the boilers.

It was readily understood that the water in the boilers had become exhausted, and Sims had been obliged to stop here to replenish the store.

Pomp and Barney were thrilled with their good fortune in coming upon the villain so opportunely.

It was a chance which they should surely embrace and which would have been seldom gained.

"Be me sowl, Pomp," said Barney, excitedly. "We must circumvent the rascal in some way or another."

"Golly, I jes' tole yo' how to do dat, I'ish."

"Shure, an' how?"

"Wait till de rapscallion am gwine down to de watah to fasten on dat hose pipe. Den we jes' skips up behind him an' yo' kin cover him wid yo' rifle while I jes' ties his hands. See?"

"Yez are a jewel, naygur," declared Barney, admiringly. "I'll let yez take the lead."

"A'right, I'ish."

Pomp crept along, cautiously keeping the Steam Man between him and Sims.

The villain had bent down, and was just in the act of putting the hose pipe into the water.

Barney crept up to within a distance of twenty feet.

"Up with hands thar, yez misfit Eyetalian,"

cried the Celt, bringing his rifle to bear upon the villain. "Av yez move a hand I'll put a hole troo yez."

Sims electrified turned like a flash. His hand flew to his belt, but Barney made a threatening move.

"Hands up!" he said, sternly.

Sims could only obey.

The Rustler's face was black with impotent wrath.

"Cusses on ye!" he gritted. "Whar did ye cum from?"

"Oh, we jist have been lukin' for the loikes av yez," cried Barney, with a complacent grin.

"Jes' yo' hol' de drop on him, I'ish, till I jes' ties up his han's," cried Pomp.

"All roight, naygur."

Sims was furious.

He in vain looked for a way out of the scrape.

He saw that he was beaten and his face was as black as a thunder cloud.

"Curse ye!" he gritted, savagely. "I'll call ye down yet."

"Not dis trip, I fink, sah," said Pomp, with a smile.

The darky tied the villain's hands and feet and left him lying upon the ground.

Pomp and Barney then hastily climbed into the cage.

The pumps had been working in the meanwhile, and the gauge showed that the boilers were well filled.

"Ta-ta, mah frien!" cried Pomp, jubilantly. "I jes' fink yo' hab a lubly time layin' dar. Yo' jes' hab plenty ob time fo' to tink ober yo' sins."

The villain writhed and twisted and blackened the air with curses.

"Cuss ye, nigger!" he roared. "I'll cut yer black heart for this!"

"I don' fink yo' will!" cried Pomp. "I don' fink yo' bettah brag at all."

"Are ye goin' to leave me here to die?"

"We'se jes' gwine to leabe yo' here," replied Pomp.

"Curse ye!"

"Youse may thank us fo' sparin' yo' life, sah. We might hab killed yo', an' it would be a good fink fo' de worl' if we jes' did do it."

"But I'll die in this position, curse ye, nigger!"

"Dat am a'right," taunted Pomp. "Youse got to die some time. Jes' wait till dark an' de wolves comes along. Ki-dar!"

The villain gasped with fear and trembling at the reflection.

"Curse ye!" he howled. "Set me free! Please do! I'll beg of ye! Ye won't, eh? I'll kill ye if ye don't!"

Thus he raved furiously.

But his captors were inexorable.

Perhaps their human tendencies might have caused them to yield but for a certain fact.

At that moment they saw a body of horsemen coming down the valley.

They knew at once that they were members of the Rustler band. They would be sure to find the wretch and liberate him.

So they hastily drew in the hose, closed the cage doors, and then sent up a defiant blast of the Steam Man's whistle.

Opening the throttle, Pomp sent the Man out onto the smooth plain.

Here they could set the Rustlers at defiance.

With swift tread the Steam Man made his way along the base of the mountains.

Pomp and Barney had but one paramount desire now, and that was to find Frank Reade, Jr.

CHAPTER VIII.

SAVED.

NEVER in his career had Frank Reade, Jr., come nearer the end of his life.

He had actually been pulled up into the air by the Rustlers when a startling thing occurred.

There was a quick, sharp crack of a rifle, and the cord snapped, and Frank's body went to the ground.

Astounded, the Rustlers turned to see who had made such an accurate shot as this.

Into the clearing burst half a hundred men, with Joe Brigham at their head.

At last the Vigilants had come.

With loud cheers they rushed upon the Rustlers. But the latter threw down their arms and surrendered.

In a few moments Frank Reade, Jr., was upon his feet and shaking hands with his friends.

It seemed that the liberated prisoners had not gone a mile before they fell in with Brigham.

The Vigilants had been scouring the hills thoroughly.

They had found no previous trace of the Rustlers, however.

They were much excited when they learned that the Steam Man had fallen into the hands of Sims.

"Why, that is hard luck, friend," said Brigham.

"Never mind!" cried Hiram Dane, "the invention shall be recovered. We will stand by you, Mr. Reade, until it is."

The Vigilants cheered, for all had formed a great respect and liking for Frank Reade, Jr.

But the question now upon the docket was as to what had better be done.

It was a question of no light sort, too.

Barney and Pomp were missing.

For aught Frank knew, they might be dead or murdered.

To look them up and recover the Steam Man seemed the principal outlook.

But first an important move was decided upon.

As thrilling experiences and great hardships were likely to ensue, it was decided to take a wise precaution.

Fort McKinney was not more than one hundred miles distant.

A party of the Vigilants were detached and Miss Eva and her father were to be escorted in safety to the fort.

At first the millionaire was anxious to remain.

"I am not decrepit," he declared, "and I want to do something to help Mr. Reade."

But he was finally prevailed upon to accompany his daughter.

It was well considered a wise and proper move.

After this party had departed, young Willis, taking an affectionate leave of his fiancée, the main body of the Vigilants, with Joe Brigham and Frank Reade, Jr., at their head, started out to ransack the hills.

First it was deemed necessary to look up Barney and Pomp.

Frank was much worried over the possible fate of his two faithful servitors.

If harm had come to them he meant to have revenge.

Through the hills the Vigilants deployed. It was some time before a trail was struck.

This led into a deep and narrow gorge. Suddenly a perfect storm of bullets came sweeping down the defile.

The enemy were in ambush very near. It was necessary to seek cover at once.

This was done, and a desultory battle followed.

The Rustlers could not very well be seen. But after a time their location was discovered.

Then bold Joe Brigham ordered a charge.

The Vigilants swept up the gorge like a whirlwind, and carried the foe before them like chaff.

The Rustlers were seemingly dispersed. Not one could be found in the hills after that.

The hills were then thoroughly ransacked. But search as they would, no trace could be found of Barney and Pomp.

Finally a story was extorted from one of the Rustlers who were held as prisoners.

"The nigger and the Irishman were killed," he declared. "Jim Wild, a friend of mine, told me he saw them thrown into a pit on the other side of the mountain."

When questioned further, the fellow could not tell where the pit was.

Frank's heart sank like lead, and he felt dismayed.

Doubt began to to be dispelled in his breast as to the fate of the faithful fellows.

He set his lips tightly.

"Somebody shall pay for it," he muttered; "they shall not go unavenged."

He was very much in earnest.

It was finally decided to leave the hills.

None of the Rustlers were there, and there seemed no use in staying.

Frank agreed to it, and the hills were accordingly left behind, and the Vigilants struck out over the plains to the northward.

A friend of Brigham's owned Ranch X, a fine establishment not twenty miles distant.

The Vigilant leader had a foreboding that the malice of the Rustlers had led them to attack this place also.

Therefore, he was anxious to visit it and ascertain.

Accordingly a course was set for Ranch X.

Brigham's fears were destined to find realization in a most awful manner.

The distance was covered in the latter part of the day.

The location of the ranch was just in the shadow of a tall wooded butte.

Long before the Vigilants reached the spot long columns of smoke were seen arising from it.

Joe Brigham's face was very pale.

"If they've spoiled Arthur Clements' place," he muttered, grimly, "they'd had better all say their prayers. They will have a Nemesis on their track."

On galloped the party toward the distant butte.

But as they drew nearer the woeful tale was plainly revealed.

The ranch with all its fine outbuildings, was laid in ashes.

The Rustlers had visited the place and left their accursed mark.

A short while later the Vigilant band drew rein upon the fated spot.

Brigham's emotions were terrible to witness. He identified the bodies of Clements and his wife in the ashes.

"Ye kin know how bad I feel, boys," he cried, "when I tell ye that Arthur Clements' wife was my own sister."

A dull murmur went up.

There was a thirsting for revenge in every man's breast.

The impulse to visit justice upon such a gang of evil-doers was paramount.

"Hunt down the villains!" cried a voice in the crowd.

"I know that I don't need to axe ye to stand by me, boys," cried Brigham.

"You bet!"

"We're with ye, Joe!"

"Lead us on!"

"I will!" cried the leader of the Vigilants.

"Believe me, lads, if Joe Brigham has to spend a lifetime to do it, he will avenge the death of these people."

The Vigilants cheered lustily and then dismounted from their jaded horses.

It was already dark and men and horses were nigh exhausted.

It was therefore deemed best to camp upon the spot until morning.

Then it was decided to take the trail and follow it to the end.

Accordingly the horses were corralled and fires built.

Venison was roasted over the fires and the evening meal was had.

Then most of the Vigilants wrapped themselves in blankets, and casting themselves upon the ground, went to sleep.

They slept as only tired men will.

With the earth for a bed, and the blue, starlit sky for a canopy, they rested as securely as if at their own homes.

But Frank Reade, Jr., was in no mood to sleep.

Neither did he remain in the camp for any length of time.

Feeling the soothing influence of the balmy night air, he walked past the guard and along the base of the butte.

Frank would not give Barney and Pomp up yet as dead.

For many years they had been his faithful servants, and he had acquired a deep affection for them.

He still clung to the hope that they were alive and would turn up somewhere.

But he wondered much what had become of the Steam Man.

If Sims had it yet in his possession, he certainly did not make any show of himself.

This was to Frank most singular.

The Steam Man should be to the Rustlers in their depredations a most valuable adjunct.

The more Frank pondered over the matter the less satisfied he became.

"Confound the rascal!" he muttered. "I don't see how we ever allowed him to dupe us in such a way."

The loss of the Steam Man was to Frank Reade, Jr., a most irreparable one.

Nothing seemed to atone for it.

He walked along in this frame of mind and scarcely heeded objects about him.

No thought of possible danger crossed his mind. He had reached a point fully a quarter of a mile from the camp.

He was almost around upon the opposite side of the butte from the camp.

Suddenly he was called to his senses in a peculiar way.

He heard what sounded like a sharp click in the bushes at his right.

Instinctively Frank thought of a hidden foe and a possible bullet.

He instantly sank down, but the shot did not come.

Instead, out of the undergrowth sprang half a score of dark forms. A sharp cry for help broke from Frank's lips.

But they were upon him like panthers in their fury.

CHAPTER IX.

A FEARFUL FATE.

"SEIZE him!" cried a hoarse, constrained voice. "Don't kill him. I've got a sweeter fate in store for him."

That voice Frank recognized in spite of the tumult.

It gave him a thrill.

"That is Sims," he thought. "The villain! Oh, if somebody would only come!"

But the high butte was between Frank and the camp of the Vigilants.

The loudest cries could not possibly be heard by his friends.

It was a thrilling situation and a perilous moment for the young inventor.

He fought well, but the villains were too strong for him.

They swarmed upon him like bees. He was beaten down and quickly made a prisoner.

With hands bound behind him, he stood in the midst of his foes.

It was dense gloom, but Sims, the Rustler chief, for he it was rescued from the position in which he was left by Barney and Pomp, by his own men, advanced and peered critically into Frank's face.

"Yes," he cried, "he is the man I want. Curse him! I will make him rue the day he ever invented the Steam Man."

"Cal Sims," said Frank, sternly, "you will expiate your crimes in a terrible manner yet, mark my word."

"It will be no fault of yours if I don't," sneered the villain; "but I've one satisfaction. Ye'll never live to see it."

Frank made no further talk.

"What'll we do with him, boss?" asked one of the men.

"Tie him to a horse and bring him along with us," ordered Sims.

Frank was bound to the back of one of the mustangs.

Then the cowboys, a full score in number, started away across the plain.

Once Sims rode close to Frank's side and hissed:

"I tell ye, Cal Sims will win yet. Ye know that gang ye sent off with the gal an' her father ter Fort McKinney? Well, I've sent the biggest part of my men off arter 'em. They won't leave a man of 'em alive, an' that gal I'm goin' ter have fer a wife. What d'ye think of that?"

The brute laughed hideously.

It made Frank sick and faint. But he had a strong belief that the party would reach the fort safely.

"Where is the Steam Man?" he asked, calmly.

Sims gave a start.

His astute nature at once perceived that Frank was unaware of the affair in which he had figured so humiliatingly.

He smiled grimly and replied:

"Oh, I've got that stored away. You'll never see it agin."

Frank did not doubt the villain's assertion. He fell into something like a despondent mood as the party galloped on through the dark night.

The butte was soon left out of sight below the horizon line.

The night was starlit and clear, and objects could be seen a goodly distance across the plain.

For some hours the band galloped on in silence.

Then the banks of the stream, thickly fringed with willows, was reached.

Here a halt was called and the Rustlers proceeded to go into camp.

Frank was taken from the horse's back and tied to a tree.

Some time was spent by the Rustlers in making the camp.

Then after the flurry was all over Sims came up to Frank and said:

"Wall, my friend, now I s'pose ye're ready fer yer dose, are ye? Wall, I'll make it a sweet one, I kin tell ye."

"I don't know what you mean," said Frank, quietly.

The villain laughed coarsely.

"Wall, I'll have to tell ye then," he averred. "It's about time for you to git ready to take leave of this sphere."

"Indeed!" said Frank, coolly. "I think I am quite ready."

"Ye are, eh?"

"Yes."

"Quite a hero, ain't ye?"

"Perhaps so."

"Ye'll be like one of them martyrs ye read about, bein' burned at the stake. Oh, you'll do."

Frank deigned no reply.

"Wall," continued the villain, coolly, "I might as well tell ye fer yer own peace of mind what I've got in store fer ye."

He ejected a huge wad of tobacco from his mouth and went on.

"I war at one time a renegade in a band of Blackfeet up in the Nor'west. They allus capture a hated foe and burn them at the stake."

"So that is the way you propose to treat me?" said Frank, coolly.

"Yas."

"Very well. I am ready."

"Oh, you are?"

"Yes."

"That settles it. The funeral will open at once."

The villain turned with a coarse laugh and beckoned to a number of his men.

"Fetch a pile of wood!" he cried. "Jest heap it up around this cuss to his chin! We'll give him a warm bath, an' don't ye fergit it!"

The men at once proceeded to obey orders. Wood was brought in great heaps from the grove near, and heaped up about the intended victim.

Frank saw that there was no doubt but that the villain meant to keep his word.

His heart sank, but he was a brave man and he would have died then and there rather than show the least sign of the white feather.

Higher yet the villains heaped the pile of wood.

They kept on until suddenly Sims cried:

"That'll do."

Then they desisted. The Rustler chief advanced and confronted Frank.

"Wall, how do ye feel now?" he asked, tauntingly.

"I feel that you are a dirty villain and a coward."

Sims' face flushed.

"That's not safe talk fer you."

"I need fear nothing now that I am about to die."

"Do ye realize it, then?"

"You will have to do the same some day. I am glad that I shall not go before my Maker with the load on my conscience that you have."

"I'll make ye eat fire for that," gritted the villain.

He picked up a brand from one of the camp-fires.

He touched it to the pile heaped up about Frank Reade, Jr.

The effect was terrific.

The light tinder-like wood flamed up. A terrible death was upon Frank Reade, Jr., the famous young inventor.

But, fortunately, fate had not decreed that he was to die in such a manner.

Even as death seemed upon him rescue was close at hand.

Suddenly through the gloom there came a flashing light, a noise like the rumbling of thunder.

Down into the camp a mighty monster came scattering the fire-brands and crushing all luckless Rustlers who chanced to be in its path.

Wild shrieks went up on the air, ear-splitting and terrifying in the extreme.

The cowboys were overturned, knocked right and left and dispersed like chaff.

The keen notes of a repeating rifle rang out and man after man bit the dust.

Round and round the camp literally cleaning it out went the Steam Man, for such the monster was, arrived just in the nick of time.

Nothing human could withstand that onslaught.

In vain Sims tried to rally his men.

Finally, seeing the futility of the attempt, coward that he was, he incontinently fled for his life.

In much less time than it takes to tell it, the Rustler gang of a score of men were put to ignominious flight by the Steam Man.

Then out of the rear door of the cage sprung Barney.

In a trice the blazing embers of the fire were kicked away and Frank Reade, Jr.'s bonds were cut.

A more astonished or delighted person than the young inventor at that moment could not be imagined.

He followed Barney aboard the Steam Man like one in a dream.

Then Pomp sent the Man out on the plain and far from the scene.

Frank sat down upon one of the bunks, quite overcome.

"My soul!" he gasped, "is this reality or am I dreaming?"

"It am suttin' reality, Marse Frank!" cried Pomp, heartily.

"Heaven be praised!"

"An' I jus' fink we was lucky to come along dar jus' at de time for to save yo' fo'm dat fire."

"I should say so," cried Frank, in amazement. "Words cannot express my joy."

"Begorra, Misther Frank, we're all roight agin," cried Barney. "We've got the Steam Man back agin."

"That is true," replied Frank, "but how did you do it?"

With this, the two faithful servitors related exactly how they had secured possession of the Steam Man again.

Frank listened with interest.

"Boys," he cried, "you are heroes. You have proved yourselves such."

"Begorra, we med up our moinds we'd foind yez anyway, Misther Frank," declared Barney.

"I done fink we did," affirmed Pomp.

"You are right you did," cried Frank.

"And I am happy once more. Now we will run down this rascally gang."

Frank decided to return to the camp, and try to capture Sims.

The return was made, but none of the outlaws were there.

They had sought safety most discreetly in flight.

As it was too dark to follow their trail Frank set the Steam Man going toward the north.

He had thought of returning at once to the butte and rejoining the Vigilants.

But when daylight came only the vast plain was upon every hand.

Mountains and timber had all faded away in the distance.

However, it was easy enough to set a course, and Frank was about to do so when a cry came from Pomp.

"Ki-dar, Marse Frank! Whatebber yo' call dat yender?"

Frank looked across the plain and saw an object approaching them.

It looked at first like a buffalo galloping down upon them.

But a second look showed that it was a horse and rider.

What was more, the rider appeared all done out, for he lay prone over the pommel of his saddle.

It was a startling sight.

CHAPTER X.

A THRILLING REPORT.

THE strange rider was headed directly for the Steam Man.

As he came nearer, Frank saw that he was able to lift his head and wave his hand feebly.

Like a flash a thought came to the young inventor.

"My soul!" he cried, "it is one of the Vigilants who went away to Fort McKinney."

This was the truth.

A moment later the rider drew rein by the Steam Man.

Frank and Barney helped him from the saddle.

He was a sight to behold.

He had been shot in four places above the belt, and was so faint and weak from loss of blood that he could hardly speak.

"My name is Jack Moors," he said, feebly.

"I—I was with the party sent to the fort with Mr. Dane and his daughter."

"Yes," said Frank, excitedly, "but how did you get hurt?"

"They are all killed except me, and I am pretty nearly done for. Mr. Dane and his daughter were carried away prisoners."

"My soul, that is awful!" cried Frank, with horror. "But who were your assailants?"

"Nearly a hundred of the Rustlers."

"And you alone escaped?"

"Yes. They did not mean that I should, for they chased me five miles, but my pony was too fleet for them and I left them behind."

"That is awful!"

"They are a bloodthirsty crew."

"I should say so."

"I—I fear I am done for."

"I hope not. Here, Barney, help me get him aboard the Steam Man."

Moors was taken aboard the Man, and a bunk was made for him.

Then Frank said:

"Something has got to be done for this man at once. His wounds are serious, and he needs a surgeon's care."

"Shure, that's thrue, Misther Frank!" cried Barney. "If that fort is not far from here, sure, I think we ought to take him there."

"You are right, Barney!" cried Frank. "I thought of that. He would get a surgeon's care there."

"I would not like to trouble you to do that," said the brave fellow, with a smile. "And yet it is hard for me to die so far from home."

"You are from the East?" asked Frank.

"Yes."

Frank saw that he was a more than ordinarily intelligent fellow. His face had fine lines in it, and he was certainly well educated.

"How came you out here in this rough country?" asked the young inventor.

"I came out here to seek a fortune," was the reply.

"Have you friends in the East?"

"I have an aged mother who is dependent upon me for support."

Frank said no more.

He saw that Moors told the truth and his

sympathies were at once excited in the fellow's behalf.

He went at once to the dasher and took up the throttle reins.

On the level ground at top speed the Steam Man could cover the one hundred miles easily in two hours.

Away he went across the plain with tremendous strides.

The prairie was as level and hard as a floor. He sped on like a whirlwind.

After a mile he was reeled off.

It was somewhere near the hour of noon, when suddenly Barney cried:

"Begorra, there she is, Misther Frank."

"What, the fort?" cried Frank.

"Shure, sor!"

"Where?"

"Dead ahead, sor."

Sure enough, straight ahead the flagstaff of Fort McKinney was plainly seen.

The Steam Man went as far as the guard line and here a halt was called.

Frank told his story to a guard, who called for the corporal and word was at once sent to headquarters.

An ambulance came out and took Moors into the hospital.

As he went away he smiled and bade Frank good-bye.

"I thank you for bringing me here," he said.

"It was very kind of you."

"It is nothing," said Frank. "I sincerely hope that you will speedily recover."

"I hope so."

The commanding officer then sent word to the guard to allow the Steam Man to pass the line.

The Man entered the fort, and Frank went in to consult with the commander.

"So you are Frank Reade, Jr.," said the officer, with a smile. "I am very glad to meet you. I am Gen. C—."

"I am glad to meet you, general," said Frank, politely.

"You have a wonderful invention there in your Steam Man."

"It is considered so."

"What is all this trouble that I hear about with the Rustlers?"

"Well," said Frank, bluntly, "I think it is a matter that the government should deal with, and promptly, too."

"I have just had advice from the War Department to send a force out, and to-morrow five hundred men will start to try and adjust matters."

"I am very glad to hear of that," declared Frank.

"Is it, do you think, as serious as represented? Are they really going to such extremes as the taking of human life and the burning of ranches?"

"I know it from observation," said Frank.

"Then they shall be summarily dealt with!" declared Gen. C—, sternly. "It is bad enough to have to deal with Indians, but white men should know enough to behave themselves."

A short while later Frank took leave of the fort.

Gen. C— knew Hiram Dane well, and said:

"If they do harm to Mr. Dane and his beautiful daughter they shall live to richly repent it!"

A few moments later the Steam Man was again speeding away across the broad and level plains.

It was late in the afternoon when they came in sight of the butte where the Ranch X had once stood.

But no sign of the Vigilants was visible there.

They had evidently left the place.

So Frank turned the Steam Man toward the distant hills.

Some while later they were reached, and the Steam Man was leisurely striding along their base, when suddenly a horseman rode out of a belt of timber.

It was Joe Brigham, the leader of the Vigilants.

But he was a sight to behold.

His face was pale and blood-stained, his

clothing shot full of holes and he seemed weak and faint.

He was overjoyed at sight of the Steam Man.

He waved his arms and shouted to attract the attention of those on board.

Frank stopped the Man and Brigham came up on a lope.

He dismounted, crying:

"Hullo, friends! when did ye get back into the machine?"

"Hullo, Brigham!" cried Frank. "You are wounded."

"Yes, a bit."

"Are you badly hurt?"

"Only a few scratches. Got any good whisky?"

"Yes."

"That will fix me all right."

Frank opened the door in the cage and Brigham came aboard.

A draught of whisky seemed to help him greatly, and he said:

"I feel O. K. now."

"But what has happened?" asked Frank, eagerly. "How did you come in this fix? Where are the others?"

"Easy," said Brigham, with a laugh. "Ask one thing at a time. Well, I'll tell you. The others are somewhere in the hills, and I expect they are having a scrap now with some of the Rustlers."

"Indeed! Why are you not with them?"

"That's what I'm about to tell you. You see, we were leaving the butte, and were attacked by a terrific gang of the Rustlers. The same gang had Mr. Dane and Eva along with them as prisoners."

"Just so," cried Frank. "I have heard of that. Go ahead!"

"Well, we had a running fight with the gang across the prairie. In the melee, and just as we reached the hills, I got separated from the others. Since then I have had six single-handed fights. I am pretty well used up, as you see, but just the same, I came out victorious."

"Good for you!" cried Frank. "You are a hero, Joe."

"No, I ain't, but I'll bet in a fair up and up fight my boys can lick Sims' gang out of their boots."

"I don't doubt it."

"And we will do it yet."

"I hope so."

"Now," said Brigham, arising, "I can't waste any more time here. I must join the boys. They will be looking for me."

He at once sprang out of the cage.

"Well," said Frank, "we want to give you some help."

"I think you can do it," declared Brigham.

"If I am not mistaken, the battle ground is apt to be in a small valley in the hills. There is a pass leading into it and I think the Steam Man can easily pass through it."

"Good enough," cried Frank. "If you will lead the way I will follow."

Brigham would have sprang upon his horse but at that moment the crack of a rifle rang out.

The animal staggered and fell.

"Thunder!" cried Brigham, reeling back,

"what's that for?"

The next instant a volley of bullets came rattling against the netting of the Steam Man's cage.

"Come aboard, quick!" cried Frank.

Brigham needed no second bidding.

He had felt several of the bullets whistle by him and had escaped being hit by them very luckily.

He sprang at once into the cage.

The door was closed and not a moment too soon.

From the cover of rocks and bushes about a legion of the Rustlers sprang. They advanced with loud yells trying to fire through the netting.

But the bullets could not penetrate the impervious steel.

"Now," cried Frank, in a ringing voice, "let us give them a royal good thrashing!"

All sprang to the loopholes and opened fire upon the cowboys.

Of course they had a great advantage over the desperadoes, as they were protected themselves.

The way Barney and Pomp worked their repeaters was a caution.

The firing was becoming red hot when an idea occurred to Frank.

He sprang to the dasher and started the Steam Man slowly out over the plain. His purpose soon became plain.

CHAPTER XI.

ON TO THE SCENE OF BATTLE.

FRANK'S scheme was an adroit one.

He meant to tempt the desperadoes to follow him out on the plain.

Once there, and a fair distance from the cover, and he would turn the Steam Man upon the outlaws like the car of Juggernaut, and crush them.

But the fire from Barney's and Pomp's repeaters was too much for the rascals.

They went but a short distance, and then retreated to the cover of the hillside.

It was certainly a victory for the Steam Man, and not one on board had received a scratch.

Brigham was delighted.

"Oh, if the boys were only here now!" he cried, "we would give them a jolly good thrashing."

"If they would only come out into the open we could do it as it is," declared Frank.

But the Rustlers did not venture to come out.

They contented themselves with firing a few desultory shots, and then the firing ceased altogether.

It was evident that they had retreated into the hills.

What was to be done now?

Brigham felt that he must rejoin his men as shortly as possible.

So it was decided to attempt to enter the hills by means of the pass named by Brigham.

But just as this conclusion was reached the sound of firing was heard.

It came from the hills and was rapid and continued.

A battle of some sort was certainly in progress.

Undoubtedly the Rustlers had come into collision with the Vigilants.

This fired Brigham with an uncontrollable desire to be with his men.

"By Jupiter!" he cried, desperately, "I must join them in some way. They need me bad."

But to start alone from that point to enter the hills would have been folly.

A move was finally decided upon.

"I have a plan," said Frank Reade, Jr. "Without doubt it will work."

"What is it?" asked the Vigilant captain.

"We will go to a point beyond that headland yonder. Then you and I will leave the cage and penetrate into the hills."

"All right!" cried Brigham, eagerly.

"We will first gain the top of that high eminence there. From it we ought to see exactly the position of the foe. Then I will see whether it is possible to enter the hills or not with the Man."

"Capital!" cried Brigham. "Let us lose no time."

"Jes' wait a bit, Marse Frank," interposed Pomp. "What will us chilluns do all dis time?"

"Stay out here on level ground and keep out of the way of the foe," said Frank, quietly.

"A'right, sah."

"Bejabbers, phwy can't I go wid yez, Misther Frank?" asked Barney. "Yez ought not to go alone."

"Not this time, Barney," said Frank, with a laugh.

Frank sent the Steam Man along.

At the objective point a halt was made, and in the cover of a clump of pines they left the cage.

Striking straight up the mountain side, they trailed along until the top of the peak was reached.

They were now well up, and could command a good view of the valley.

But there was no sign of life there.

Looking beyond it, however, Brigham gave a sharp cry.

"See the table-land!" he cried. "There is the battle."

Sure enough, there the lines of battle could be plainly seen.

A deep canyon ran along one side of the plateau.

Behind some scrub pines the Vigilants were ensconced, while the Rustlers were behind rocks at the other end of the plateau.

"There is the battle field!" cried Frank; "but how will you rejoin your men, Brigham?"

"I see a way."

"Where?"

"Do you see that pass up there back of the little round top hill?"

"Yes."

"Well, I can sneak up there and come down behind them. I will be there in twenty minutes."

"Good! I wish you luck."

"Thank you! but—"

"What?"

"How will you get there with your Steam Man?"

"I see a way."

"Where?"

Frank pointed to the eastward.

A cry of joy escaped Brigham's lips.

"Good!" he cried; "that will bring you down right in the rear of the villains."

"Yes, and I think I can drive them out of their position."

"If so we can defeat them."

"Yes."

"Good! now I'm off. I shall look for the Steam Man."

"He will be on hand."

Brigham was out of sight the next moment.

He went down through the mountain pines like a flash.

Frank stood and watched the distant conflict for a few moments.

Then he started to return to the plain below.

"There is nothing to be gained by remaining here," he muttered. "I will return to the Steam Man."

With this decision he started to retrace his steps. But he had not gone far when a thrilling thing occurred.

Frank heard a low, sibilant whistle from some brush just ahead.

It was answered from a point just in his rear.

The young inventor was instantly upon his nerve. He scented danger ahead.

He paused suddenly and dropped behind the stump of a tree.

He was not a moment too soon.

The crack of a rifle smote upon the air. The bullet whistled just over his head.

Had he remained standing, he must have been instantly killed.

"Humph! that was narrow enough," muttered Frank, in a cool manner. "I wonder who the rascals are?"

Again the whistle sounded faintly. Not a sign of any person could be seen.

Without doubt the rascals were in hiding. That they were a stray few of the gang of Rustlers Frank felt sure.

He was now in somewhat of a quandary and quite undecided what to do.

If he exposed himself for even a moment, there was great danger of being shot down.

On the other hand, he was much averse to remaining in his present position, for he wished to rejoin Pomp and Barney and the Steam Man as quickly as possible.

But it seemed as if he must be literally surrounded by the rascals.

"By Jupiter!" muttered the young inventor, dubiously. "What am I going to do? This is getting serious."

Then it occurred to him to adopt Indian tactics.

With this thought Frank dropped flat upon his stomach and began to work his way snake-like through the underbrush.

He was an adept in this art, for he had learn-

ed the trick during one Indian campaign in which he figured.

For fifty yards Frank was successful in thus making his way along.

Then he came to a clear space.

Here he was brought to a halt.

He heard a noise just above his present position, and at the spot he had left. He at once concluded that the villains were there searching for him.

But for this open ground which he had now reached he might have felt perfectly sure of escape.

But to attempt to cross this was to expose himself to view.

This he knew would be a risky thing, for with their rifles the Rustlers could pick him off.

Yet to remain where he was meant certain capture.

Frank did a large amount of thinking in that brief space of time.

"Upon my soul!" he muttered, "I hardly know what to do. Ah!"

The exclamation was caused by a voice just above coming to his ear as clear as could be.

"I say, Jim, the bird has flown!"

"So it looks, Bill."

"What shall we do?"

"Get the trail, can't ye? He can't be far away."

"All right."

Frank experienced a thrill. He knew that the foe was very near at hand.

The peril was most imminent. What was he to do?

His desperate fear was only increased when suddenly he heard the voices again.

"Hello, Jim!"

"Hello!"

"Where are ye?"

"Right here!"

"Oh, I see. Have you found any sign of the trail yet?"

"No."

"Wall, I think I have."

"Ye don't mean it!"

"Yes, I do."

"That's luck!"

"Come down and see what ye think."

"All right."

Then Frank heard them coming crashing through the underbrush toward him.

It was a desperate moment.

There was no doubt but that they had the trail and would very quickly be upon him. Instant action was imperative.

Frank took the desperate chance.

In an instant he was upon his feet and speeding across the open space.

A loud shout went up. Then rifle bullets came whistling towards him.

But in motion as he was the aim was inaccurate.

None of them hit him.

Fortune was with him in that respect. He crossed the open and reached the little belt of timber beyond.

Another moment and he would have been safe. The foliage of the brushwood was about to close over him when suddenly up, seemingly from the ground, sprang a man in his very path.

He clutched at Frank and the next moment both went to the ground in a heap.

Frank made a desperate attempt to spring up and break away from his foe.

But the fellow hung to him and a desperate struggle followed.

Down the mountain side came the others, a yelling horde.

"Hold on to him, Jake!"

"Don't let him go!"

"He's our huckleberry. Don't let him get away!"

Frank made a last desperate effort to break away from his captor.

But the villain had him pinned helplessly to the ground.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE QUICKSAND.

MEANWHILE Pomp and Barney, left with the Steam Man, were not having by any means the most pleasant sort of a time.

After Frank and Brigham had disappeared, Pomp produced his banjo and began to sing some plantation melodies.

This irritated Barney, and after listening to "Old Uncle Ned," "My Kentucky Home," and a few other effusions, the Celt opened fire.

"Howld on there, naygur, wid yez clatterin' noise!" he cried. "Will there niver be an ind av it all? Yez will drive me crazy, that yez will!"

"Golly, I jes' reckon I'se as good a right fo' to play dis banjo as yo' has fo' to listen," retorted Pomp.

With this he drifted off into some sort of a jingling clog, and the way he banged the strings was a caution.

Barney stood it as long as he could, and then he dived into a locker and brought out a fiddle.

It was a genuine Irish affair, and Barney claimed that it was an heirloom of the Shea family of generations gone by.

Certainly it was old enough, as the scarred and seamed wood would indicate.

Pomp saw the instrument appear and a smile contorted his features.

"Dat's right, I'ish," he cried. "I jes' fought yo' would jine de band sooner or later. Cum along."

"Begorra, I'll soon dthrow the pandymonium av that blasted instrumment av tarture yez have there," retorted Barney.

"Don' yo' call no names, I'ish. I jes' advise yo' not to do dat."

"Bejabbers, I'd loike to know how yez are going to prevint me."

"G'long, I'ish, you'se a heap poor stuff, yo' is."

Barney ignored this statement and at once began to tune the fiddle.

Of all the scraping and caterwauling shrieks that violin gave forth the equal was never seen.

It was certainly enough to paralyze the hardest nerves.

Of course, Pomp had hard work to keep any sort of time on the banjo.

If Barney was irritated in the first place Pomp was doubly so now.

The shrieking and groaning and whirring and tweaking of the violin completely squelched the jingling music of the banjo.

Pomp tried to keep the air up, and then paused in disgust.

"Hol' on dar, I'ish. If yo' is gwine to play, why don' yo' play some music worth listenin' to?"

"Begorra, I'm tuning me fiddle, so I am, an' fer all that it's better music than yez kin give."

"Dat am a lie, sah!"

"Phwat?"

In an instant Barney dropped the fiddle and sprang up.

"Dat's wha' I said, chile."

"Yez call me a loiar, do yez?"

"Dat's right."

"Begorra, if yez don't take it back I'll lick yez out of yez boots."

Pomp laughed scornfully.

"Huh! Yo' amn't able fo' to do dat yet, sah!" he said, coolly. "I jes' gibs yo' warnin' fo' to let this chile alone."

"Will yez take it back?"

"No."

"Begorra, I'll never have a man call me a liar an' thin not retaliate," stormed Barney.

"Shure, take that, ye black, ye!"

With this Barney let out with his right and took Pomp in the shoulder.

The darky went over like a ten-pin.

But he was almost instantly upon his feet.

Dropping his banjo, he rushed upon the Celt like a thunderbolt with his head lowered.

"Golly sakes!" he cried, "I jes' teach yo' better dan to strike dis chile dat away."

Barney had not time to get out of the way.

The two practical jokers had not stopped to think of the consequences.

Pomp's head took Barney fair in the stomach. The Celt was fairly lifted from his feet, and struck the door of the wire cage full force.

As the bolt was open, the door yielded, and Barney went through it like a cannon ball.

He rolled over several times upon the hard floor of the prairie.

Then he picked himself up as mad as a March hare. He started for the cage door. "Bejabers, I'll have the heart av yez for that!" he roared.

But Pomp was ready for him.

Quick as a flash the darky shut the cage door and locked it. Then he cried tantalizingly:

"Huh! Yo' jes' fink yo' is big stuff, don' yo', I'ish? I jes' reckon yo' 'pologize to me now afo' yo' gits aboa'd agin."

Barney was raving mad.

"Open that dure, ye black scoundrel!" he roared. "Av yez don't I'll have the loife av yez!"

"Yo' kin jes' wait a bit, I reckon," scoffed Pomp. "I jes' fink I hab got de best ob yo' dis time, sah."

Barney was furious. In his wrath he picked up clods of earth and began throwing them at the cage.

As they struck the wire screen they burst into dust, and this invading the cage, made it most unpleasant for Pomp.

The darky stood it for a few moments with patience.

Barney saw that it irritated the darky, and accordingly he kept it up.

"Huh! if yo' don' stop dat, I'ish," cried Pomp, finally, "I jes' go off an' leave yo' here all alone."

"Begorra, yez had betther not do that," retorted the Celt. "Shure, Misther Frank will be comin' back soon."

"If he do he will jes' gib it to yo' fo' throw-in' dat dust into dis yere cage."

"Bejabers, it's yure worruk fo' to clean it out."

"Yo' kin bet I won't."

Thus the two jokers kept chaffing each other for some time. But Pomp could not stand the dust any longer and so he opened the throttle and let the Steam Man slide ahead.

In a few moments he was beyond range.

Then it occurred to the darky a clever trick to let the Man run out of sight behind a spur of the mountain wall a few hundred yards beyond.

"I'll jes' gib dat I'ishman a good scare," muttered the darky. "He'll fink fo' suah dat I'se gwine off an' lef' him."

The next moment the Steam Man disappeared beyond the spur and Barney was left alone on the plain.

Pomp, shaking with suppressed mirth, let the Steam Man run a couple of miles before turning back.

"Fo' suah, Marse Frank won't be back fo' some time yet," he reflected. "I'se jes' gwine to gib dat Mick a good scare."

But after awhile Pomp decided to turn back. He let the Steam Man out to top speed, and ran the return distance in quick time.

As the Man rounded the mountain spur, Pomp looked for Barney.

The darky was given a great start.

The Celt was nowhere in sight.

"Golly!" muttered the darky with sudden alarm. "Dat am queer. Wonder where ebbet dat chile hab gone?"

Then as a sudden fear struck him, the darky repented his joke, and muttered:

"Sakes alibe! It kain't be dat harm hab come to him. I jes' nebber fo'give m'se'f if dat am a fac'."

Everywhere he looked for Barney.

But there was no doubting the fact. The Celt had disappeared.

Pomp ran the Steam Man up and down at the base of the hills in the vain search for Barney.

He was just about to give it up in despair, when he fancied that he heard a faint shout of distress.

And just at that moment Pomp chanced to catch sight of a light object on the plains not fifty yards away.

It looked like the decapitated head of a man. A chill struck Pomp.

Instantly he recognized the features.

"It am Barney fo' suah!" he cried, with dilated eyes; "but fo' goodness sake where am

de res' ob him? Looks laike as if his head had been cut off clean."

Indeed, Barney's head was visible, but nothing could be seen of his body.

To Pomp's amazement the lips moved and a husky cry came to him.

"Begorra, will yez iver come to save me, naygur? Shure, ye'll 'ave to hurry."

"Glory fo' goodness!" gasped the astonished darky. "I nebber did hear afo' ob a man wid his head cut off talkin'."

"Hurry up, ye blathershite!" came Barney's voice. "Shure it's to the cinter av the earth I'll be afther going."

Then Pomp comprehended the case.

"Golly!" he exclaimed. "He's head ain't cut off at all. It am jes' bekase he am haf buried in some hole in de ground!"

It was but a moment's work for Pomp to leap down from the Steam Man and rush up to Barney.

"Look out, yez omadhoun!" cried the Celt. "If yez don't yez will git into the soup, too."

Then Pomp saw that Barney was up to his neck in a deep patch of quicksand.

The Celt had not seen the quicksand until he was full upon it.

Then the first thing he knew he was in it up to his waist.

In vain he tried to wriggle out of the clingsands.

He was every moment sinking lower, and soon it was up to his arm-pits.

The Celt yelled and shouted for help until he was so hoarse that his voice could hardly be heard a dozen yards away.

"Och hone, sure it's kilt I am intoirely!" he cried, despairingly. "Divil a bit av a chance is there for me at all, at all."

But when he saw the Steam Man returning, then his hopes began to rise.

"Shure, if that naygur only hurries up he'll loikely save me!" he cried, hopefully.

It was with difficulty that he was able to attract Pomp's attention.

But he finally succeeded in doing so, as the reader has seen.

"Golly, howebber did yo' git into dat hole?" cried Pomp.

"Shure, that's no kind av a question to ax me. Why don't yez thry to git me out av this hole?" fumed Barney.

"Jes' yo' hol' right on, I'ish!" cried Pomp, "an' I'll hab yo' out ob dat in no time."

The darky sprang into the cage and came out with a rope.

This he threw to Barney, saying:

"Jes' yo' put dat under yo' arms, I'ish, an' I pull yo' out in a minit."

"Shure, an' how am I goin' fer to do that?" cried Barney. "Ain't me arrums deep in the sand?"

This was a fact.

Pomp was nonplused.

"Howebber is I gwine fo' to git dat I'ishman out ob dat?" he reflected. "Ah, I jes' fink ob a plan."

"Harry up there, yez slow poke!" howled Barney. "Shure, I'll die here afore yez iver get me up."

"Jes' hol' right on to yo' red hair, sah, and I'll soon pull yo' out!" cried Pomp.

He ran into the timber at the mountain slope and came back with a long birch pole.

This he threw across the patch of quicksand.

With another pole to steady himself, Pomp made his way out cautiously until he could reach Barney.

Then with his hands he cleared away the sand so that he could draw the noose of the rope down under the Celt's arms.

This done he crawled back to terra firma.

"Begorra, yez did that well, naygur," cried Barney.

"Oh, I ain' gwine fo' to let yo' die," cried Pomp, cheerily. "Jes' yo' hol' right on, I'ish. I pull yo' out."

"Shure, it's an angel yez are," said Barney, softly.

"I reckon I'se a brack one den," laughed Pomp.

"May Mither Mary bless ye fer an honest naygur. That's not blarney, me gossoon, neither."

"G'long wif sech talk as dat, I'ish. Jes' yo' hol' right on now."

Pomp knotted the other end of the rope to the end of the steam wagon.

Then he jumped aboard and opened the throttle easily.

His purpose was plain.

With an easy, steady pull, the Man went forward, and Barney began to emerge from the quicksand.

The rope pinched him not a little, but he bore the pain manfully.

It was a narrow escape for him from a painful death.

Slowly but surely the rope grew taut and drew him out of the clinging quicksand.

Another moment and he was upon level ground.

Then drawn quickly out upon firm ground, Pomp closed the throttle and sprang out of the cage.

In a few moments he had released the rope from Barney's shoulders, and the Celt, uninjured, got upon his feet.

Barney had experienced a narrow escape, and, getting upon his feet, he gripped Pomp's hand.

"Shure, ye're me best frind afther all!" he cried. "I'll niver fergit ye fer this."

The two fast friends now, for a time, laid aside practical joking.

CHAPTER XIII.

A BATTLE WITH "OLD EPHRAIM."

FRANK was a prisoner hopelessly among the Rustlers, who had laid in ambush for him.

It was a disheartening reflection, and for a moment he gave way to despair.

But this was quickly followed by a deep resolution to make his escape.

"Hold onto him, Jake!" cried one of the Rustlers.

"You bet I will, Jim."

"Who is he?"

"Don't ye know?"

"No."

"Why, it's luck we've struck. He's the high cockalorum what owns that Steam Man."

"Ye don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do."

"Wall, we are in luck."

Frank was now allowed to get upon his feet. Somewhat singularly, the Rustlers did not make an attempt to bind him, or to take his weapons away from him.

"Now, capen," said one of them, addressing Frank, "we've got ye, as ye kin see. 'Tain't any use for ye to try to git away, but I'll tell ye jest how it is. We're of the gang of Rustlers, but we've got tired of the thing. See?"

"I see!" said Frank, nodding his head, while a queer thrill shot through him as he wondered what the fellow was driving at.

"Yer see, we've tired of playing Rastler an' we're goin' to bolt ther gang."

"You are?" exclaimed Frank, in amazement.

"We jest are. We don't want no part of Cal Sims any more. That's why we're here instead of being over yender fightin' agin' Brigham's men."

"Well!" exclaimed Frank, approvingly.

"You're doing the right thing."

"So we think."

"You certainly are."

"Wall, however it may be, we've got sick of it."

"Yes."

"Now we're going to cut sticks for the east."

"Yes."

"In course you're in our power and we could kill you."

"I am not afraid to die."

"I reckon not, friend, from the game fight ye made. But we have made up our minds to give ye yer life on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Frank, quietly.

"That ye don't trouble us if ye see us down to Sunrise, an' that ye won't let Brigham's men do it."

It was a fair proposition, and Frank looked at it in that light. These desperadoes were

turning over a new leaf. Frank knew that his life was in their hands. There seemed no better way than to compromise.

Accordingly this was agreed upon. Viewed in certain lights it was a singular affair, but nevertheless true.

The Rustlers shook hands with Frank and a moment later had vanished down the mountain side.

"Well," muttered the young inventor, as he turned to retrace his steps to the Steam Man, "this turned out different than I expected."

But though Frank had escaped in a singular manner from this scrape, he was close upon yet another.

He had not taken a dozen steps down the mountain when he became aware of a thrilling peril.

A hoarse growl sounded in a copse near, the bushes parted and a giant grizzly bear appeared to view.

Frank experienced a thrill as he realized the danger he was in.

The brute was directly in his path down the mountain.

Moreover, it looked ugly and aggressive, growling savagely and licking its reeking chops.

"By Jupiter! here's a go," thought Frank. "Whatever will I do?"

He could not very well avoid an encounter with the bear.

To go to the right or left would only be to expose himself to a flank attack.

The brute certainly meant business, and Frank was nonplused.

He stood a moment motionless, watching the monster.

Few people can understand the terrible feeling experienced in confronting a grizzly.

There is something about the monster when met in the wilds which will inspire the strongest men with terror.

Frank Reade, Jr., was an adventurer in many lands, but he was bound to admit that he never felt more squeamish in his life than at this moment, facing this mammoth specimen of "Old Ephraim," as the Western hunter has dubbed the grizzly.

He considered several desperate plans. One was to attempt to dodge and outfoot his foe.

But he knew that this was not easy to do. The big brute would easily overtake him.

Another thought was to risk a shot at the brute. But this was risky. Yet it seemed the only method.

By placing a shot in the eye or under the shoulder, to strike the heart accurately, might bring him down.

But there were chances against the success of such an attempt.

However, Frank decided to risk it.

He knew that a failure would be a serious thing. It would mean a hand-to-hand struggle for life.

So he drew his big hunting knife and bared the blade ready for work.

Raising his rifle Frank took keen and careful aim at the bear's eye.

Crack!

The rifle spoke sharply, the bear staggered and uttered a tremendous growl.

Frank experienced a chill.

To his horror he saw that he had missed his mark.

The bullet had struck the bear's skull just over the eye and glanced off.

But to the young inventor's amazement the big brute did not at once rush upon him.

He appeared rather to be stunned by the shot and stood irresolute.

It was Frank's opportunity.

Quick as a flash he threw a fresh cartridge into the breech.

Again he aimed at the bear.

This time he did not try the eye.

He aimed for the brute's heart and blazed away.

This time the bear gave a hoarse roar and sprang forward.

The battle was on.

The shot, as the other one had, had missed its

mark, and had broken the bear's paw instead of penetrating its heart.

The next moment, and before Frank could retreat, the big brute was upon him.

Frank knew that his life hung in the balance.

He fought warily and coolly.

The bear's claws were what he must avoid, and he dodged around the big brute like a jumping-jack.

At every available chance he slashed the bear with the knife.

The ground was literally covered with blood, and torn up like a harrowed field by the bear's hind claws.

Such a contest certainly the sun rarely looks down upon.

For full fifteen minutes Frank pursued these tactics.

He received a number of smarting wounds, but none serious.

He well knew the fatality of coming to close quarters with the brute.

He realized that his life depended upon keeping the brute at arms' length.

It was now a question of physical endurance on Frank's part.

Of course, every slash with the knife drew blood from the bear, and this loss must weaken him to a great extent.

But Frank's strength was fast giving out, and he realized that he must make a desperate attempt to end the struggle.

So he accepted a desperate chance.

Suddenly rushing in upon the brute, he drove the knife to the hilt in the brute's side.

Then darting back just in time to evade the claws, he made a flying leap down the mountain side.

Frank stopped only once to look back.

He saw the big brute in pursuit, but his gait was uneven and staggering.

There was no doubt but that he was done for and would soon die.

The struggle was won, but Frank had just strength left to reach the base of the mountain.

Barney and Pomp in the Steam Man saw him coming.

Barney leaped out and ran to meet him.

"Shure an' phwat happened yez, Mither Frank?" cried the alarmed Celt. "An' phwere-iver is the other gentleman?"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LAST OF THE STEAM MAN.

"I AM all right," said Frank, faintly. "Only give me a little stimulant."

Pomp now sprang down and the two servitors lifted Frank into the cage.

Then whisky was produced and Frank took a strong dram.

He felt much better after this and soon revived.

Barney and Pomp listened to a recital of his experience with interest.

"Shure, Mither Frank, ye had a lucky escape," cried Barney, "but yez should 'av' taken me along wid yez. I feared yez wud get into thrubble."

"I don't know but that you are right, Barney," said Frank, with a smile, "but I handled the chap alone."

"So yez did an' roight well, too. Shure, Mither Frank, yez did ilegant worruk."

Frank was soon himself again, and then Barney, who seemed eager to be doing something, said:

"But shure, Mither Frank, phwativer shall we be doin' now I'd loike to know?"

The sounds of battle from the table-land were now plainer than ever.

It was evident that a desperate contest was going on there.

Frank sprang up, saying:

"I am all right now. Let us go at once to the scene."

He sprang to the throttle and opened it. The Steam Man moved away rapidly.

Frank began to pick his way up the mountain side.

It was slow work, and in many cases Pomp and Barney had to get out and move heavy rocks out of the path.

But good progress was made, and in course of time the Steam Man reached the top of the rise.

From here down to the table-land there was a clear course.

Also on the way the Man could run alongside the rocks, behind which were the Rustlers, and give them a raking fire.

The Steam Man was started down the slope. The horses of the Rustlers were seen corralled near, and then the gang themselves were seen.

It was a matter of much surprise to Frank that the force of the Rustlers was so large.

There seemed to be fully two hundred men, or twice as many as there were of the Vigilants.

There would seem to be large odds in favor of the Rustlers.

But the Vigilants were making a brave and desperate fight just the same, and were holding their own.

"There are a good many men to tackle," cried Frank.

"I jes' flink we'se good fo' 'em," cried Pomp.

"Bejabbers yez kin bet we are," shouted Barney.

Down the slope went the Steam Man. The outlaws did not see it, until suddenly the ear-splitting whistle burst upon the air.

Then they turned in surprise.

Frank held the brake and throttle rein, and Barney and Pomp opened a scathing fire upon the villains.

It was destructive in the extreme, and men went down before every bullet fired.

Down along the line of the Rustlers sped the Steam Man.

None of them dared to get in its way for they would have been crushed like egg-shells.

But yells and cries filled the air and volleys of rifle balls rattled against the netting.

Not a bit of harm could be done the Steam Man or its occupants, however.

Like a Nemesis the Steam Man followed on the heels of the retreating desperadoes.

They were literally mowed down like weeds before a scythe.

They tried to seek cover upon the other side of the rocks.

But in doing this they exposed themselves to the fire of the Vigilants.

And now Joe Brigham, who was over-anxious to whip the Rustlers, committed an indiscreet act.

He rose up and gave his men the order to charge.

"Down upon them!" he yelled; "don't spare a mother's son of them. Forward, all!"

The Vigilants cheered and rushed to the attack.

Across the plain they rushed.

By this time the Steam Man had reached the plain after its destructive course.

The Rustlers meanwhile had gone back behind the rocks.

They saw their foe coming, and at once opened fire.

The first volley was very destructive to the Vigilants. At least a dozen men fell before it.

Too late Brigham saw his mistake.

"My God!" cried Frank, with horror; "Joe has done the most fatal thing that he could. He will get whipped."

Indeed, this looked certain.

The Rustlers poured a steady fire into the Vigilants' ranks.

It was quite a ways across the open space, and there was nothing to shelter one.

But it was too late to retreat.

All hope now centered in carrying the position of the cowboys. Pluckily the Vigilants kept on.

But it seemed certain that they would be swept out of existence.

Frank was almost beside himself with desperation.

"My soul!" he cried; "something has got to be done, and that at once!"

But the Steam Man could not well go back over the course by which it had come down.

A circumstance now occurred, however, which changed the complexion of everything.

Singularly enough, the Rustlers, instead of remaining in cover, now sprang down upon the plain to meet the Vigilants.

But their purpose was quickly seen.

They outnumbered the Vigilants four to one, and their purpose was to surround them in the open.

In fact, they succeeded in doing this in the twinkling of an eye.

A desperate battle followed, and the result might have been the extinction of the Vigilants.

But Frank now set the Steam Man straight for the line of Rustlers.

Down upon them the Man swept like a thunderbolt.

The next moment he was in the midst of the gang; men were overturned and crushed as the Man forced his way through.

But in the passage savage blows were dealt the Man.

Rocks were hurled at it and blows were dealt the netting with clubbed rifles.

The result was a fearful injury was done the Man. One of the heavy stones struck him upon the steam chest and rebounding hit the safety-valve lever.

After passing through the gang Frank tried to close it, but to his horror could not do so.

The Man was flying with terrific speed straight toward the brink of the deep canyon, which the plateau terminated in upon one side.

Straight toward the mighty gulf fled the Steam Man.

In vain Frank tried to shut off steam or change his course.

"My God!" he cried, "we are going over." An instant thought of leaping from the cage came to all.

But before they could reach the door, the

Man was over the edge. Some of the gang of Rustlers concealed behind rocks here fired a volley after it.

Over the edge went the Steam Man. Down, down with fearful flight.

There was a thunderous crash at the bottom of the gorge and all was still. The Rustlers crept to the edge and looked down into the abyss.

The Steam Man was but a heap of fragments of iron.

Yards distant, thrown by the concussion, were the bodies of the three occupants. They seemed to be dead.

Just as the Steam Man took its awful plunge to destruction, down into the open from the mountain side swept a division of U. S. cavalry.

Fully five hundred men in gleaming uniforms and with flashing sabers came upon the scene.

The Rustlers saw them, knew that they were the division sent from Fort McKinney, and knew that the game was up.

They tried to beat a retreat.

But the soldiers surrounded them, and they were prisoners.

The next moment young Lester Willis was joyfully greeting Mr. Dane and Eva, this time safely rescued.

But Willis and Joe Brigham had seen the Steam Man go over the cliff, and as soon as possible with a detachment went thither.

Two surgeons were taken along.

A path was found leading down into the gorge. A few moments later the forms of the three travelers were picked up and carried up the plateau above.

The surgeons made a quick examination,

and as they were doing so Frank Reade, Jr., opened his eyes and sat up.

By some strange miracle he had escaped practically unhurt save a tremendous amount of bruising. He was revived and was soon put upon his feet.

Barney and Pomp also were discovered alive.

But Barney had two ribs broken and a shoulder dislocated, and Pomp had a broken arm.

The surgeons quickly set the broken bones and dressed the wounds. The joy of all at the lucky result was great.

Cheers were given for the brave crew of the Steam Man. Then litters were made for the wounded ones, and a start was made for Fort McKinney.

For some weeks Barney and Pomp were in the hospital.

But they finally emerged as bright as ever, and were able to return to Readestown with Frank Reade, Jr.

The Steam Man was a total wreck, and Frank did not attempt to remove it.

But the Rustlers were disposed of and did not trouble the region again. The brave Vigilants under Joe Brigham's captaincy came in for great honors and returned to Saint's Repose covered with glory.

Mr. Dane had his ranch rebuilt and is living there to-day.

But Lester Willis has adopted the business of ranchero and has formed a partnership with Mr. Dane, with lovely Eva as his happy bride.

Frank Reade, Jr., accepted the loss of his wonderful invention, the New Steam Man, philosophically. His fertile brain was sure to devise something even more excellent in the future, an account of which the reader may find in No. 7 of the Frank Reade Library, entitled:

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